THE RING
THE FURY CONTINUES
CHRIS EUBANK JR VS CONOR BENN
APRIL 26
LONDON
TOTTENHAM

REV IT UP UNLEASH YOUR FURY

SNK®

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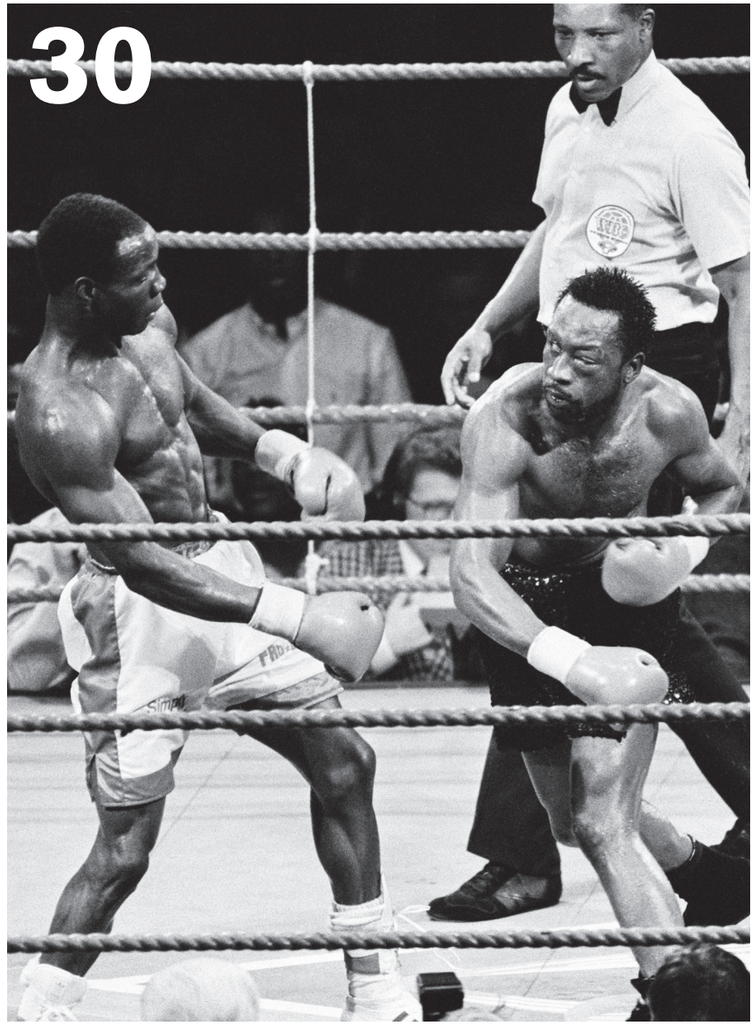


Chris Smith


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Cover Illustration By Rodrigo Lorenzo

## What is FATAL FURY: City of the Wolves?

SNK's beloved *Fatal Fury* series first hit the market in 1991, spearheading the fighting game boom that went on to sweep the industry in the 1990s. *GAROU: MARK OF THE WOLVES* (released in 1999) has for some time served as the franchise's most recent installment. But that is all about to change. Twenty-six years on, a brand-new entry – *FATAL FURY: City of the Wolves* – is set to arrive on the scene! *FATAL FURY: City of the Wolves* features a unique art style, an innovative REV System that supercharges the excitement, plus a host of other battle systems even more robust than before. The game also breathes new life into the series by introducing two distinct control schemes, ensuring the most immersive engagement for newcomers and veterans alike. And those are just some of the new features to be discovered! The streets of South Town are a hotbed of action, wild dreams, and even wilder ambition. Here, at long last, a new legend is about to unfold.

## About SNK

Headquartered in Osaka, Japan, SNK develops, publishes and distributes interactive entertainment software on a global scale. Known for such franchises as *THE KING OF FIGHTERS, METAL SLUG* and *SAMURAI SHODOWN,* SNK continues to focus on its rich console game and arcade history.

## OPENING SHOTS

**No fighter likes a stalemate, but this one was a crowd-pleaser: Irish fringe contender Connor Coyle (left) stood his ground against Vito Mielnicki Jr. during an action-packed 10-round middleweight bout on the Denys Berinchyk-Keyshawn Davis undercard, holding off a late rally from the popular New Jersey native to remain unbeaten via majority draw.**

Al Bello

## OPENING SHOTS

**In his first world title challenge and just his 13th pro bout, Keyshawn Davis (left) was untouchable. The 25-year-old Virginian lifted the WBO lightweight crown from Denys Berinchyk with a fourth-round KO in The Theater at Madison Square Garden on February 14.**

Al Bello

stc

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## Saudi in Boxing and Telecoms: A Masterclass in Branding

Alexander Isley, [Entrepreneur and branding expert], once said: “A brand is the promise of an experience”. But what happens when a brand transcends a promise and becomes a force of nature? This is the story of boxing’s resurgence and the parallel rise of stc Group, a telecommunications giant, both fueled by the ambition of Saudi Arabia.

### Boxing’s Revival

It’s no exaggeration to say boxing was on the ropes. Since the golden age of Ali and Duran, the sport’s image suffered something of a technical knockout. But the final bell hadn’t yet rung. Boxing is back, revitalized by Saudi Arabia’s strategic investments and negotiating prowess, spearheaded by the vision of H.E Turki Al-Sheikh. Fans are now witnessing the fights they craved, living out modern versions of the iconic moments from the 20th century - and even catching an Oasis show along the way. From Riyadh to London to Las Vegas, the Riyadh Season banner flies high, bringing boxing fans the bouts they had given up on, ushering in a new golden era.

### Brand Strength: More Than Just Belts

How did boxing nearly fade away? The rise and fall of a brand’s strength tells a powerful story. It's a potent mix of history, success, compelling narratives, and an evolving promotional landscape. Boxing battles for attention against a crowded field of sports, from football to golf to MMA. Major fights, like Dubois v AJ, become cultural historic moments. Influencers from around the world are now also fighting for a share of voice, competing with broadcasting powerhouses and global streaming services. But brand strength isn't just about pay-per-view buys and sponsorships. It’s rooted in the feeling you get when you see a punch and hear the crowd gasp - the emotion it stirs, the lives it touches.

## stc Group: Connecting the Kingdom and Beyond

Just as boxing must constantly evolve to remain competitive, so too must brands adapt and innovate in the dynamic digital landscape. stc Group's impressive climb to a top ten ranking in the Brand Finance Report reflects precisely this kind of evolution: a foundation of established principles adapting to the demands of digital transformation. From its inception, stc has prioritized innovation and customer experience, consistently evolving to meet the changing needs of the market. This forward-thinking approach positions stc as a leader in the tech sector, operating across a diverse range of digital terrains, from cloud infrastructure and terrestrial networks to space-based solutions and even undersea cables.

### Parallels: A Winning Strategy

The trajectory of stc Group mirrors the strategic growth seen in the resurgence of boxing. Just as strategic investment can elevate boxing’s global profile, stc's commitment to technological advancement has strengthened the vital infrastructure that communities worldwide rely on for connectivity. Both operate within highly competitive environments and understand the power of a trusted and reliable brand. This shared understanding, combined with strategic vision, significant investment, and effective execution, has propelled both to remarkable success.

### Bright Horizons: Shaping the Future

The future is bright for boxing and stc Group – and they are partnering for the journey. Boxing, with its captivating blend of athleticism and drama, is poised for a return akin to its best years. With sustained investment and a focus on renewed storytelling, the sport is reclaiming its global dominance. stc Group remains ideally positioned to capitalize on the ever-growing demand

for innovation – and leading the fight into the future of the digital transformation in the Kingdom and beyond. By continuing to innovate and invest, stc has already solidified its position as a leading telecom provider, connecting people and businesses across the region and beyond. Just like boxing, the power of brand building continues to win, and Saudi Arabia is at the center of it all.

COMMISSIONER'S CORNER

# Nothing To Fix Here

By Randy Gordon

Recently, I went out to dinner with my wife and three other couples, all neighbors of ours.

The four women sat together, talking about who-knows-what, while the group of men discussed some of their favorite things – all of them sports-related (new golf clubs; upcoming skiing trips; would the Los Angeles Dodgers repeat; the collapse of the New York Jets and New York Giants; and what my opinion was of the Jake Paul-Mike Tyson fight). Naturally, I was asked, "Was the outcome fixed?" I told them, "I didn't know it was broken!"

The three guys I was with are all casual fans but truly enjoy talking about boxing, watching boxing and reading about it. They enjoy it so much that I can see each becoming a more ardent, knowledgeable and interested fan.

The Paul-Tyson discussion opened up a whole new topic: "Does the hometown (local) fighter always win the decision if there isn't a knockout ending?"

BOOM!

That's the reputation boxing has, even to many IN the business. I explained this to my friends:

When I was a young, fledgling fan of boxing more than six decades ago, I believed that hometown fighters would automatically win the decision if the final bell sounded. It's what I learned from a few uncles and older cousins who watched the sport in the 1940s and '50s on *Friday Night Fights* and *Gillette Cavalcade of Sports*.

Also, a boxing judge who was already a 32-year veteran when I became chairman of the NYSAC in 1988 told me, "I always give close rounds to the hometown fighter when he is facing an out-of-towner." When I told him he was to immediately change his feeling on that – and he is to score each and every round for the fighter who won the round – he told me my "absurd theory" will get me laughed out of boxing. He told me none of my veteran judges would score it that way. "A tie in any round goes to the hometown fighter," he insisted.

After I spoke to each of those veterans one by one, telling them my "absurd theory," a few said they would comply with my wishes – and did so going forward. Several didn't. Their judging licenses weren't renewed.

With all I've seen and learned over the decades, the term "hometown decision" still bothers – and concerns – me.

Coming from New York, I have seen plenty of close decisions, even a few questionable decisions within New York's vast boundaries.

**Roy Jones Jr. is robbed in the Seoul 1988 Olympic final.**

John Iacono

However, in my years as New York's boxing commissioner, I can honestly say I never witnessed a blatant hometown decision in my state. Not one!

Very close? Yes.

Controversial? Perhaps, but mainly to the losing fighter and their camp.

But blatantly hometown? As I said three paragraphs ago: "Never."

I became curious as to what many of today's boxing insiders thought of the term "hometown decision."

I called one dozen of the most experienced, qualified names in the sport to get their thoughts.

Here are their responses:

**Henry Hascup**, president of the New Jersey Boxing Hall of Fame, regarded by many as the leading historian in the sport: "I think the judging is better today than it ever has been. That's because of all the training and seminars they go through. Plus, there is so much scrutiny put on these guys by social media, the print media, announcers, the fans and their own commissions. There will always be close decisions and even controversial ones, but you won't see judges giving close rounds to the hometown [fighter] just because he's the hometown favorite."

**Larry Goldberg**, president, Boxing Insider Promotions: "Nobody means for it to happen. Cheering for the local fighter definitely can affect a judge's perception."

**Larry Hazzard**, commissioner, New Jersey State Athletic Control Board: "The notion that the hometown fighter should win should not exist in the mind of the judges. Yet that concept is ingrained in the minds of many. It's up to us, as regulators, to change that. The judges, who are certainly affected by the crowd, need to have the courage to score every close round the correct way and with the correct boxing criteria, and not lean towards the hometown fighter."

**Melvina Lathan**, former world-class judge and former chairperson of the New York State Athletic Commission: "I never allowed where the fighter is from to come into my mind. I pay attention to the round, score it and move on. In my years as head of the New York State Athletic Commission, I expected the same from my judges. I believe they performed in that very manner."

**Don Majeski**, booking agent, matchmaker, historian: "Many fights are celebrity-driven. Face it: The tie in any round goes to the attraction. Because judges are human, they can and have been swayed by a cheering hometown crowd. A very close fight between a hometown guy and his out-of-state opponent will usually go to the hometown guy. If that same fight took place on neutral grounds, either guy could win. But in front of the hometown crowd, the hometown wins. Nothing shady. No incompetence. Just a very close fight in front of a hometown crowd."

**John McKaie**, New York-based judge: "When I judge, I see two fighters. I don't care who they are. I score each round on who won, not on where they are from or what their reputation is."

**J. Russell Peltz**, promoter and IBHOF inductee: "Decades ago, Philadelphia and Massachusetts were two [places] which were known for hometown decisions. Oh, there are some bad decisions rendered, but not so much of the hometown variety. I think because of all the scrutiny, social media and strength of today's commissions, there are fewer hometown decisions than there were years ago."

**Marc Ratner**, former longtime executive director of the Nevada State Athletic Commission and current vice president of regulatory affairs for the UFC: "Living in Las Vegas, where there are so many major fights which have huge ramifications on the sport, I differentiate between 'bad decisions' and 'hometown decisions.' Most of the big fights, with the exceptions of those including Floyd Mayweather, are fought between non-Nevadans. Many times, favored fighters get beat, and the judges may be one Nevadan and the other two judges from around the country or even from outside the U.S. There are a lot of decisions that are controversial, and some I disagree with, but very few I view as being 'hometown decisions.'"

**Jack Reiss**, recently retired top referee, still a licensed judge with the California State Athletic Commission. He has judged over 500 bouts: "Our job is to closely watch each round and then score it. I have no – and show no – favoritism to either competitor."

**Tom Taylor**, California-based, A-list referee: "I believe we would be naive to think 'hometown decisions' don't happen. Speaking for myself, I view every fight as the blue corner against the red corner. That's it! Nobody gets any kind of favoritism."

**Bruce Trampler**, matchmaker and IBHOF inductee: "Hometown decisions are common, but they don't necessarily imply crookedness. It's just natural for fans to loudly root for the hometown guy. Their cheering can influence the judges, especially in very close rounds."

**Steve Weisfeld**, judge, regarded by many as the best in the boxing business: "Before we can even be an apprentice amateur boxing judge, we are taught not to listen to the crowd or be influenced by any number of extraneous factors. Sometimes hometown boxers win, and sometimes they don't. Both occur due to the action inside the ring, not outside of it."

After you read this, keep a close watch on the decisions rendered on boxing shows you attend or view on TV. You'll see decisions of every variety. You'll see 'em all.

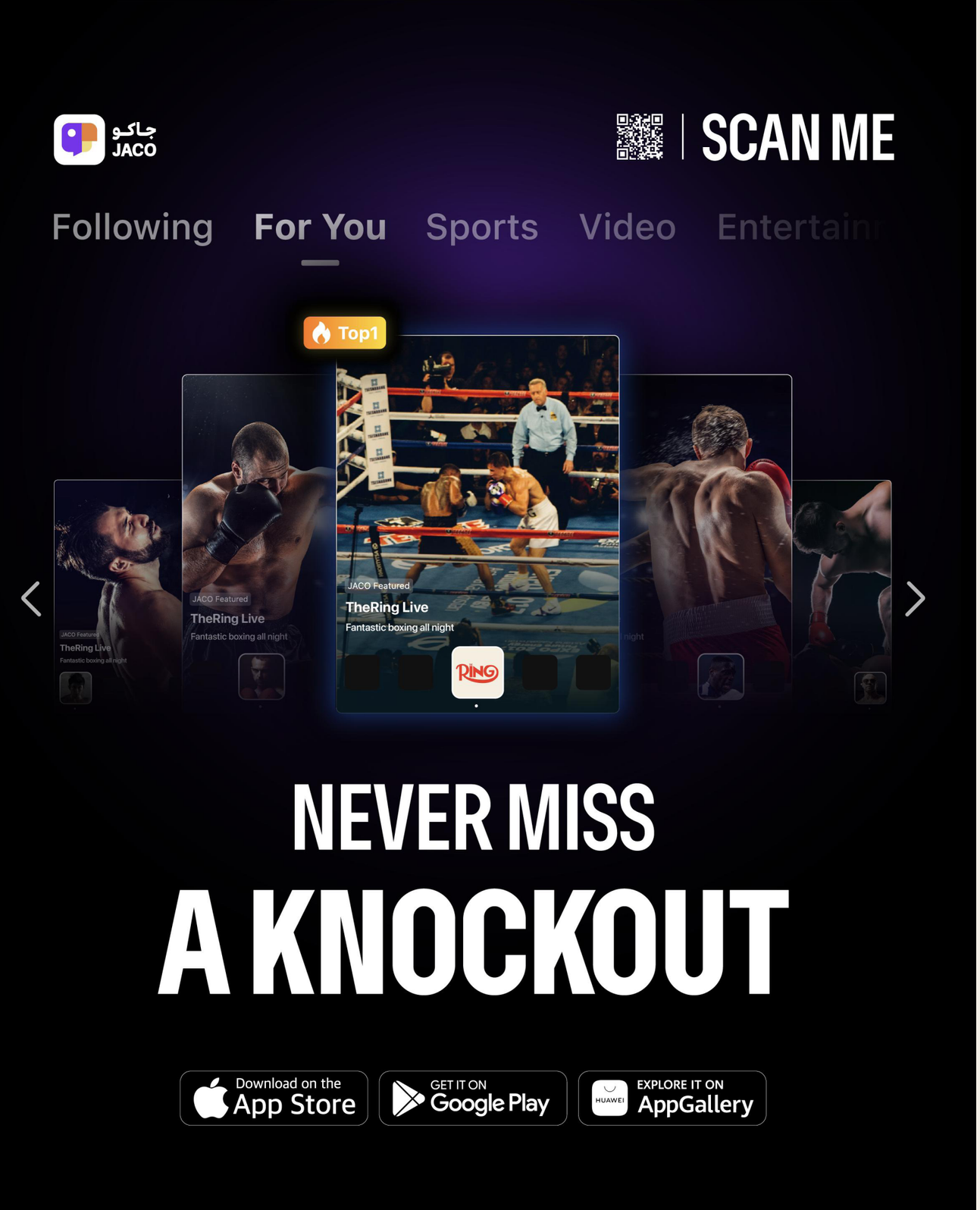
Rarely will you see a "hometown decision."

★ ★ ★

By the time you read this column, the best boxing card in recent memory – February 22 in Riyadh – will have taken place. Don't be surprised if, by the end of 2025, many year-end awards come from this absolutely-phenomenal fistic smorgasbord.

★ ★ ★

Want to be a part of this column? You can, simply by sending your questions, thoughts, rants… whatever…to my email, which is TheCommishRandyG@gmail.com. I will print several of the best in next month's "Commissioner's Corner." RING



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# The Beast Must Be Fed

**The Canelo-Paul-Crawford news/rumor triangle nearly broke Boxing X.**

Keeping up with what passes for boxing news in this age of "content creation" is difficult even during a slow period. When things speed up, it's impossible.

Mind you, I'm not blaming content creators for all of the confusion and misinformation that exists today, and "fake news" certainly isn't relegated to the boxing world. Tabloids and 24-hour cable news began blurring the lines between rumor and fact – and between informing the public and entertaining the masses – decades before websites replaced newspapers.

Now that social media is in full bloom and information is disseminated faster than the speed of thought (or common sense), there's just no time for seemingly outdated concepts like credible sources and fact-checking, or lofty ethics such as not misleading the public.

Journalism has been eschewed in favor of "feeding the beast."

The fans that comprise "the beast" – and, sadly, much of the media that feeds it – can't tell the difference between an official event announcement, a fight deal that's still in the works or promotional subterfuge.

This was never more evident than during the first week of February, which began with reports that the much-talked-about Canelo Alvarez-Terence Crawford super middleweight clash had been "agreed to" and set for Allegiant Stadium in Las Vegas, followed by rumors of Canelo vs. Jake Paul on Netflix being a "done deal" for May 3, also in Sin City, followed by news of the abrupt cancellation of Canelo-Crawford. And just before the weekend, news of Canelo-Paul being canceled sucker-punched an already dazed boxing public just before it was given whiplash by the announcement that Canelo-Crawford was back on.

Hardcore fans were confused, bedazzled and disgruntled. And just to be clear, I'm not pointing a finger at any boxing news source – Ringmagazine.com and The Ring's social media branches were very much a part of the shit show.

By the time this issue sees print, "the beast" will have moved on to the next feeding frenzy, so I won't bother with any deep dives on old news.

Nor will I assign blame for the misdirection, as many fans did (understandably), or declare the

Stephen McCarthy

**Tyson-Paul was a megaevent, but not the kind Canelo wants to be part of.**

"winners" and "losers" of the whirlwind news cycle, as content creators and members of the media did.

The players involved in what unfolded – Alvarez, Crawford, Paul, Turki Alalshikh, Al Haymon, Richard Schaefer, Netflix and DAZN – are all power brokers in this wayward business. They'll be just fine – at least financially speaking – no matter what happens.

Here's all that matters to me:

Alvarez gave Paul the middle finger and signed a four-fight deal with Riyadh Season beginning with William Scull in Saudi Arabia on May 3, which sets up the most intriguing matchup that can take place in America and could quite possibly be Canelo's swan song on U.S. soil.

I don't care much for his Riyadh debut. Scull, the holder of the IBF 168-pound title that was stripped from then-undisputed champ Alvarez last year, is no different from the challengers the Mexican star outclassed in 2024 – Jaime Munguia and Edgar Berlanga. Scull is undefeated, Ring-ranked, and he has no chance. The only difference is that the Germany-based Cuban lacks the aforementioned pair's fan-friendly styles (and fan followings).

However, a victory over Scull will lead to the Vegas showdown with Crawford in September, and I do care about that one. It's the biggest legit event that can take place in North America, and the U.S. boxing scene desperately needs it.

It might be the last major U.S. event that Alvarez takes part in. The other two fights of Canelo's four-bout deal will take place in Riyadh in February and October 2026.

Alalshikh's social media post announcing the deal with Canelo noted that February and October would be "big fights." A rematch with Dmitry Bivol has been mentioned as a potential matchup for the February date along with other opponents that, quite frankly, sound only slightly more interesting than William Scull.

I doubt either of Canelo's 2026 dates will include David Benavidez, The Ring's No. 2-rated light heavyweight, who spent three years (2021-2023) lobbying for a shot at the future hall of famer.

Alvarez, a 66-bout veteran at 34, has reached the "Money" Mayweather phase of his near-20-year pro career. Let's face it, Benavidez (30-0, 24 KOs), known to his fans as the "Mexican Monster," is what a prime, mid-2000s Antonio Margarito was to the aging welterweight version of Floyd – too much pressure, too many punches, too big, too damn tough and too much risk.

I won't be shocked if 2026 is Canelo's final year as a prizefighter.

I wish there were a legitimate Mexican or American star ready to take his place, but alas, the best-known boxer that North America has to offer is a former Disney Channel actor who made his name during the early days of social media and content creation.

Paul (11-1, 7 KOs) – whose previous bout, an eight-round decision over 58-year-old Mike Tyson, nearly crashed Netflix – actually has the opportunity to become an even bigger attraction by taking over the May and September holiday weekends that had belonged to Canelo (and to Mayweather, Oscar De La Hoya and Julio Cesar Chavez in previous decades).

I have a couple dance-partner suggestions for Paul if he does indeed take over the Cinco de Mayo and Mexican Independence Day weekend dates:

Andy Ruiz – the roly-poly former unified heavyweight champ is Mexican, bilingual, affable and, believe it or not, he's still got fans despite only fighting three times over the past five years and looking pedestrian at best.

Ruiz is also laid-back to his detriment (and Paul's advantage). He might be past his prime and desperate enough for the payday to play nice with Paul, especially if the 28-year-old influencer fights him under the "Tyson Rules" (eight-round distance, two-minute rounds, 14-ounce gloves). Here's some free advice for Paul: Instead of talking your usual shit during the pre-fight buildup to this fight, just hang out with Andy. Smoke weed, play Xbox, do fun shit and share it on your social media. That will be sufficient promotion, and I bet it encourages the big lug to take it easy on ya.

Badou Jack – No, this respected veteran isn't Mexican, but his world title is! The Dubai-based Swede, who faced the best super middleweights and light heavyweights before moving to cruiserweight, isn't as big as Ruiz, but he's more dangerous because he's serious about his profession.

Paul won't get the WBC 200-pound titleholder to agree to Tyson Rules, but he might be getting him at the right time. Jack is 41 and hasn't fought in more than two years.

More free advice for Paul: Get him now before someone else does, like the WBC's No. 1 contender, Ryan Rozicki.

Rozicki, the heavily tattooed hitter from Canada who bears an uncanny resemblance to Conan O'Brien, might not be a bad choice for Paul if Ruiz and Jack aren't available. I'm kidding. That dude is terrifying. He'll try to kill Jake.

I have no idea who Paul will choose to fight this year or who will ultimately face Alvarez in 2026 – and there's no doubt that there will be a revolving door of rumored opponents – but I hope the coverage of that process is done with more professionalism and patience than the reporting of their aborted May 3 event.

I know that's easy for the editor of a magazine to say. A monthly publication isn't under the insane minute-by-minute pressure to break news that websites and social media accounts are tasked with. The Ring often has the luxury of waiting until the dust settles on finalized events before writing about them, so we have time for journalism and the ethics that come with the profession.

I only bring this up, dear readers, because I want you to hold us to those standards. We have to feed the beast like every other media outlet, but we'll feed it quality food.

BY THE NUMBERS:

# King Levinsky

by Don Stradley • Illustration by KronkAAArt

**He's not in the International Boxing Hall of Fame, but hard-hitting Harris Krakow of Chicago, better known as "King Levinsky," was more entertaining than 80% of the people enshrined in Canastota. After all, this is a man who claimed he once lost a fight because his feet hurt. It was only later that he realized he'd put his shoes on the wrong feet. Here's his story by the numbers.**

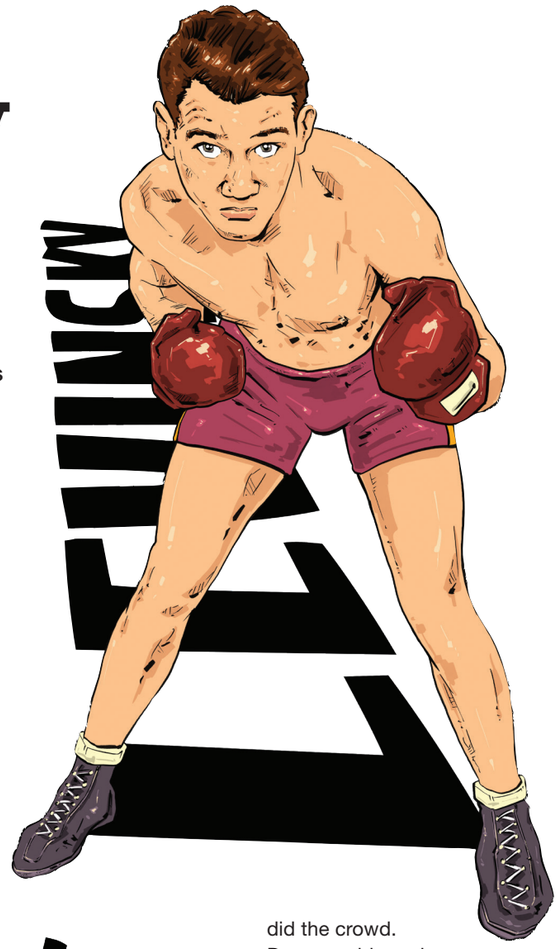
## 116

**fights »**

Levinsky (1910-1991) was primarily a heavyweight gatekeeper. If you were a young prospect during the Great Depression era or a faded star making a comeback, you'd inevitably cross swords with him. He wasn't clever or crafty, just a slugger who somehow managed to win more fights than he lost. Levinsky's record of 74-35-7 (with 40 KOs) reflects an erratic career, but not his ability to draw customers or the stunning power of his overhand right. The Brooklyn Times Union once described Levinsky's right hand as "a fearful thing to watch as it goes swishing through the air."

Having grown up in Chicago's largely Jewish west side, Levinsky first earned money at his family's fish market on Maxwell Street. When he turned to boxing, his wild-swinging style and fun-loving personality earned him a local following. Because of his earlier vocation, Levinsky became known forever as "The Kingfish."

Levinsky's most significant win came in 1931, when he conquered the brilliant Tommy Loughran. In what the Associated Press called the "biggest ring upset of the season," Levinsky defeated the former light heavyweight champion by 10-round decision, dropping him multiple times in the process. Though Loughran defeated him in two other bouts, Levinsky's victory over him was a career peak. Levinsky also triumphed over Leo Lomski, Jimmy Slattery, Paulino Uzcudun, former heavyweight champion Jack Sharkey and Don McCorkindale, whom Levinsky decked seven times en route to a decision win. There was also a surprise first-round knockout of the highly regarded Charley Retzlaff. Unfortunately, he failed against Max Baer and Primo Carnera. "Da Preem" beat Levinsky twice on points. Baer did the same.




## 4

**rounds with Jack Dempsey »**

When Dempsey's post-retirement barnstorming tour brought him to Chicago in February of 1932, Levinsky was the obvious opponent. The exhibition drew more than 23,000 fans to Chicago Stadium, breaking the city's previous indoor attendance record for boxing. When it was over, 18 of the 24 sportswriters polled thought Levinsky got the best of it, as did the crowd. Dempsey blamed his poor performance on a head cold, but Levinsky's 15-year edge in youth had something to do with it, too.

"When the bell clanged at the finish of the fourth round," Dempsey wrote in his 1977 autobiography, "I knew I no longer had any business being in the ring."

Being known as the man who thwarted Dempsey's comeback was nice publicity. Kingfish milked it for the rest of his life.

## 0

**title shots »**

The closest Levinsky came to a title shot was in 1934, when he boxed an exhibition with reigning champion Max Baer. In Round 2, Levinsky made the mistake of taunting the champ. Baer responded by knocking Levinsky cold. According to the AP report, Kingfish "had to be carried to his corner" and needed five minutes to recuperate.

## 1

**suitcase full of neckties »**

Levinsky tried several occupations, including stints as a tavern owner and a professional wrestler. His real talent, and what he became best known for, was hustling neckties. The old fish peddler became a necktie peddler, cutting a swath from Chicago to Miami to Las Vegas, his merchandise displayed in a giant cardboard case. He managed to sell enough of the gaudy things to make a living of sorts. It became common to see Levinsky at major fights or baseball training camps putting the squeeze on someone to buy one of his items. Boxing insiders made jokes about him and his ties, and at least once every few years some sportswriter would fill a column with tales of the pathetic old heavyweight reduced to selling ugly neckwear. Yet Levinsky seemed happy. He was usually driving a flashy car with an attractive lady for company. Life was good.

Levinsky claimed his customers included Frank Sinatra and other celebrities, and by the 1970s his wife (number three) was giving the ties a personal touch by ironing on a special "King Levinsky" autograph. Levinsky had a few different sales pitches, one of which was "Hey, I'm punch drunk. Can you help me out by buying a tie?" Another had Kingfish saying, "I'm only selling neckties until I can get a rematch with Joe Louis."

Perhaps his greatest hustle involved a simple wristwatch. Levinsky would show it to some sucker and say, "Dempsey gave this to me after we fought. It's probably worth a few hundred bucks, but I'll sell it to you for 20." Once the sale was made and the happy customer walked away, Levinsky would reach into his pocket and produce another watch identical to the one he'd just sold. There's no telling how many people thought they owned the very watch that Dempsey had given to Levinsky. People often debated if he was as dumb as he acted, but when it came to separating people from their money, all agreed Kingfish was a genius.

## 141

**seconds against Joe Louis »**

In 1935, a whopping crowd of 39,195 came out to Chicago's Comiskey Park to see Louis destroy Levinsky in less than a round. Levinsky went down four times before referee Norman McGarrity stopped the debacle. For perhaps the only time in his career, Levinsky heard boos from a Chicago audience. He'd never fight in his home city again.

The fight spurred rumors that a terrified Levinsky begged the referee to stop it, which Levinsky denied. There were also allegations that gangsters had paid Levinsky to flop. Adding to Levinsky's woes, his purse was held up by a local fishmonger who claimed Kingfish owed him money for a shipment of herring.

## 1

**equally colorful sister »**

Not trusting the people around her brother, Levinsky's sister, Lena, left the family fish business and became his co-manager. "She was crazy," said promoter Chris Dundee. "She would cuss like a man, and when she was at ringside, she was jumpin' all over the place. That's why they called her 'Leapin' Lena.'"

Known for constantly changing her hair color and for a shrieking voice that could be heard up in the cheap seats of any arena, Lena amused sportswriters with her bold behavior. Among her many stunts was when she came between Kingfish and his new wife, a 19-year-old fan dancer named Rosie Glickman. Thanks partly to Lena's meddling, the marriage lasted only six weeks. (Rosie sued Lena, claiming she had turned Kingfish against her.) Indeed, Lena was a unique character. But in 1935, after she'd suffered a nervous breakdown, a trio of psychiatrists declared Lena insane. After a period at Kankakee State Hospital, Lena resurfaced in the 1940s as the owner of a dress shop. Though famously protective of her brother, Lena was sometimes accused of mishandling his finances. Even Kingfish said, "Lena lost the money because she fell in love with a con man."

# R.I.P. To The Dean Of Boxing Writers

By Steve Kim

**The late, great Mike Katz was inducted into the Hall of Fame in 2012.**

On Tuesday, January 28, word started to spread throughout the boxing community that Michael Katz had passed away at the age of 85. This news was confirmed as his colleagues who for years had a seat on press row beside him started to pen tributes in his honor.

One of the most poignant came from Ron Borges (formerly of the Boston Globe), who at one time was his friend, and then a hated rival – to a point that they had an infamous skirmish at a Top Rank promotion that got physical and left Bob Arum on the floor as collateral damage.

Borges had the grace to laud Katz for his talent and his moments of goodness, but also the honesty to point out his flaws. To love Katz meant that you would inevitably hate him at times. To be his friend meant that you were inevitably going to be his enemy, at least at certain points.

That's just the way it was with the talented and temperamental "Dean of Boxing Writers," who wrote loudly and carried a big cane – that he wasn't afraid to swing.

Perhaps his unconditional love was reserved for his family, which seemed to be the case. For everyone else, his feelings were a bit more volatile, depending on his mood or his internet connection that day.

With him, you were either an ally or an adversary. There was almost no in-between.

Lou DiBella, who from 1993-2000 was the "boxing czar" for HBO Sports, was among those who greatly admired Katz. He said of him, "Katz was irascible. He was curmudgeonly. He was Oscar the Grouch. He could turn on a dime. His fuckin' cane was a lethal weapon – and I loved him."

In the 1980s and '90s, Katz was arguably the most powerful boxing scribe in America. Pre-internet, almost every major paper had a dedicated boxing writer that did weekly columns and covered the big fights. And being based in New York (first with the New York Times and then the Daily News) meant he had the biggest bully pulpit.

"He was very influential," said DiBella, "because he was among the two or three best boxing writers of his time. But also because he didn't give a single fuck and was a gigantic fan."

In that era, the likes of Katz, Borges, Wallace Matthews, Jerry Izenberg, Jon Saraceno, Pat Putnam, Ed Schuyler, George Kimball, Bernard Fernandez and Phil Berger were the guardians at the gate. What they wrote mattered. To DiBella, what Katz thought meant even more.

"I consulted Michael Katz more about the matches I made and the decisions I had to make than I did anyone else in the press," he admitted.

DiBella believes that generation of writers was much more independent and downright ballsier than modern-day media members. He has a point. But being friendly with Katz didn't shelter you from his barbs.

"Katz would kill me when he was in on a fight I made," DiBella says with a laugh. "One of my funniest stories ever was after [Arturo] Gatti had been in one of his losses – which was a bloodbath. In the next fight, Katz calls me and goes, 'You're a sick fuck. You're the greatest matchmaker of your time, but you're a sick fuck. You're like the Marquis de Sade. What are you trying to do, kill people?'

"And then he goes, 'I love it. It's a great fight.'"

A few days later, DiBella opened up the paper. "[Katz is] ripping me apart for putting ... Gatti in another World War, calling me 'Marquis de Sade.'"

Katz was fearless and perhaps reckless in his approach. He could have the most poisonous of pens, something that DiBella admired.

> "If he had the opportunity to go after something, he was going to double and triple down on that opportunity, even if he didn't feel that strongly about it."

"If he had the opportunity to go after something, he was going to double and triple down on that opportunity, even if he didn't feel that strongly about it. If he had an angle, if he had a story, he didn't care who he offended. In fact, if he wasn't offending somebody, he thought he wasn't doing it right."

DiBella freely admits: "Michael Katz was a mentor in some ways, a dear friend of mine. He still went after me more than people I don't get along with. You weren't going to change Michael, and that's why you loved him, because there was an honesty and a professionalism around his curmudgeonly, insanely hostile nature at times that just made him one of the best."

While Katz's relationship with DiBella was mostly love with a bit of hate, it was hate and more hate with Arum, the founder of Top Rank, who was the unintended third man in the Katz-Borges fracas.

"He clearly wasn't objective," said Arum, who admitted that other writers who came before him had severe biases of their own, pointing out that Dick Young was so anti-Don King that "when you read him, you had to take him with a grain of salt."

But what truly bothered Arum was that "Katz tried to peddle himself as being fair. He wasn't."

Things got so bad between them that Arum sued Katz for libel after he called him a "Yom Kippur whore" in a piece he penned for International Boxing Digest in 1997 as Top Rank promoted a fight card on HBO during that holy weekend. After some intervention from Thomas Hauser, a settlement was reached, and Katz did issue an apology.

Things never thawed between the two.

"No, I never liked Katz. I never liked his personality. I never liked the fact that he felt himself to be the oracle, when he wasn't," Arum told The Ring. "I thought he was a posturer and I didn't think he was a great writer. That's the truth."

Arum, who is now 93, has a much higher assessment of the generation of writers that came before the above-mentioned, including Young, Red Smith, Milton Gross, Shirley Povich and his personal favorite, Jim Murray. In Arum's view, they were truly gifted wordsmiths. Those who came after them were "pale reflections."

Katz was not beloved by everyone. With his personality, and with what he wrote, he probably understood that better than anyone. There are many descriptions that have been written about him, but perhaps it was put the best by longtime manager Shelly Finkel, who at one time enjoyed a close relationship with Katz:

"He was a boxing character."

# This Is The Way

By Al Bernstein

**The first Ryan vs. Mayer fight was an all-out war in New York.**

Most everything about women's boxing is terrific. The best in the sport fight each other regularly, no one gets kicked to the curb for losing a fight, and action-packed 10-round title fights with razor-thin margins of victory are the norm, not the exception.

If there was ever a poster child for all that, it is the March 29 rematch between Mikaela Mayer and Sandy Ryan. This fight is the sequel to a WBO welterweight title bout that literally had something for any boxing fan, no matter what their taste. Are you someone who likes turmoil, conflict and hostility in the build-up to a fight? Well, ahead of their September 27 battle last year, Mayer accused Ryan of stealing her longtime trainer, Kay Koroma, to train her for the fight. Pre-fight appearances featuring both camps were volatile, to say the least, and as Ryan was leaving the hotel to go the arena on fight night, some cowardly jerk drove by and threw red paint on her as she stepped out the front door. This put the fight in jeopardy and fueled more rancor between the two camps. Enough turmoil for you?

Or maybe you are a fan that doesn't care about that stuff but just loves a great fight? Well, when Ryan decided to still go through with the fight after that traumatic incident, she combined with Mayer to produce one of the very best fights of 2024. It was 10 rounds of back-and-forth action, Mayer controlling parts of the fight with combination punching, movement and good countering, while Ryan found her rhythm in the middle rounds and then landed big left hooks and rights as she marched ahead. It was a scintillating and close fight that ended in a reasonable majority decision verdict for Mayer, marred only by Waleska Roldan's absurd 97-93 scorecard. There is no universe in which Ryan won only three of the 10 rounds. It was a fight that cried out for a rematch because of the closeness and excellence of the fight and the events leading up to it. This being women's boxing, of course we get a return bout.

The tension between these two boxers and their camps is still thick going into the rematch. Mayer is anxious to put to bed the idea that she won because Ryan was distracted by the horrid event on fight day, and Ryan badly wants to win her title back. Mayer, with experience as a media person herself, is more adept at framing things about Ryan – even to Ryan's face. The Californian has tried to get in Ryan's head in joint interviews. She says that Ryan's team failed her in how they reacted to the fight-day incident and has suggested to Ryan that they will do so again this time. Great Britain's Ryan, for her part, has tried to present a calm demeanor and even suggested she's happy to come back to America for the rematch despite the incident and losing a close decision.

Sarah Stier

There are differences to point out between these two women. The 34-year-old Mayer, adept and comfortable with being a public figure in every way, is three years older than Ryan, the more reserved, less-loquacious Brit. And Mikaela has more pro experience with a 20-2 record to Sandy's 7-2-1 mark. They have, however, traveled a somewhat similar boxing highway. Both had lengthy and successful amateur careers that had them starting somewhat late as pros at age 27. Both have been in close fights that did not go their way. Mayer suffered two heart-wrenching losses, one to Alycia Baumgardner, and the other to Ryan's countrywoman, the ageless Natasha Jonas. The Jonas loss was especially tough, because the vast majority of fans and pundits (including me) thought Mayer won that decision. Ryan lost the close one to Mayer and was robbed of a win by way of a spurious draw vs. Jessica McCaskill, denying her two additional titles and a Ring championship. She also lost a split decision to former longtime lightweight and junior welterweight titleholder Erica Farias in an upset but avenged that defeat. Farias also lost a decision to Mayer around the same time.

Another similarity between the two is that both were able to get title matches immediately following title losses. Mayer's next fight after the loss to Jonas was her chance at Ryan's title, and here we have Ryan getting the immediate rematch with Mayer. I mentioned this kind of thing as a strength of women's boxing, and it is that. But fair reporting dictates that I point out the fact that women's boxing still has work to do in creating better depth of good fighters in each division. So, the good name fighters have an easier time getting "next" without falling far back in line. In men's boxing, there is more depth in most divisions, and that works against this happening as much. There is no question, however, that the number of highly talented women in each division, especially the lighter weight classes, has vastly improved in the last several years, and this process continues at a fairly rapid pace.

So, what of this appealing rematch in the ring on March 29? It is a perfect style matchup. Neither woman was down or hurt in their first match, but both appeared to be buzzed a couple of times by big shots, and there were plenty landed. Ryan needs a quicker start in the rematch. She surrendered some early rounds – or more aptly put, Mayer took them. In a 10-round fight with only 20 minutes of actual boxing, that can cost you the fight. Ryan's mission is to cut off the ring and create good angles for her counterpunching. Mayer, who used lateral movement to good effect, combined clever boxing with moments when she stood her ground and landed quick combinations. She would like to repeat that in this match. There is no question Ryan was doing better in the second half of the fight than she did in the first part. Can she sustain that momentum in "Round 11"? We are talking about nuanced changes in strategy and technique, but overall it would be shocking if this match was not extremely similar to the first fight – and that is precisely why it merits a column from me in Ring Magazine. There is no reason to think we won't see another fight of the year candidate.

While the drama surrounding the first event has fueled much of the interest in this rematch, at the end of the day it is more noteworthy on its own merit. It is one of two women's welterweight title matches in March. On March 7, Jonas is defending her two crowns against the undefeated Ring/WBA champ Lauren Price, the pride of Wales. It would be on-brand for women's boxing if the winners of these two fights would meet this year to create an undisputed champ, and that has already been discussed publicly by the four participants. In 2024, there were seven title unification matches in women's boxing and two more with all four titles and Ring championships on the line for undisputed status. And more importantly, almost all of the title defenses were between two of the best fighters in their respective divisions.

As the first quarter of the year comes to an end with what most everyone expects to be an exciting battle between Mayer and Ryan, the rest of the year in women's boxing should start to come into focus. A Katie Taylor-Amanda Serrano trilogy match is expected to happen, and anyone who saw the first two believes the third will be another thrilling chapter in their storied rivalry. Claressa Shields is likely to lure either Savannah Marshall or Franchon Crews-Dezurn to her new, higher weight class for rematches. Shields and Crews-Dezurn had an exciting battle in their pro debuts, and the Shields-Marshall 2022 battle was one of best of the year, male or female. Newer champions seeking to be established stars, like Gabriela Fundora, Caroline Dubois, Skye Nicolson, Ellie Scotney and Yamileth Mercado, will be scheduling title defenses, and veteran champs such as Alycia Baumgardner, Terri Harper and Dina Thorslund will look for big fights to burnish their reputations. Chantelle Cameron, the only one with an official win over Taylor, is seeking a chance at another world title. Even to invested boxing fans, some of these names may not be familiar, and that is the challenge women's boxing continues to face – more exposure for its talented fighters. But even on the male side of things, that problem exists.

While all that sorts itself out, women's boxing can rest assured that in the welterweight division, March promises more excitement with its top four fighters facing each other and an undisputed champion within sight. But then again, in women's boxing, as the Mandalorian would say, "This is the way." RING

BOOK REVIEW:

# Call of the Warrior

By Thomas Hauser

Call of the Warrior is a coffee-table photo book published by Hail Mary (founded in 2020 with the goal of publishing high-quality art and photography books). Twenty-eight members of the boxing community are profiled, with text written by Gareth A Davies and matching photo layouts. The book has superb production values. Its 256 pages are printed on heavy, glossy stock. If there's a flaw, it's that the text is a little too smooth around the edges.

The book is a celebration of boxing. But too often, its subjects are portrayed in an overly flattering light. Davies has been covering boxing since 1990. He's one of the sport's most knowledgeable observers and knows its underside well. The inclusion of dark shadows would have allowed the light to shine brighter in the contrast.

Call of the Warrior is available from multiple outlets, including https://hailmarypublishing.co.uk.

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*Thomas Hauser's email address is thomashauserwriter@gmail.com. His most recent book* – MY MOTHER and me – *is a personal memoir available at Amazon.com. In 2004, the Boxing Writers Association of America honored Hauser with the Nat Fleischer Award for career excellence in boxing journalism. In 2019, Hauser was selected for boxing's highest honor – induction into the International Boxing Hall of Fame.*

**Tyson Fury:** "Beating Klitschko, a goal I'd had from the age of fourteen, triggered something. I've suffered with a lot of mental health problems my whole life – OCD, depression, anxiety, paranoia. And having reached my Everest, I didn't know what was left for me in life. Now I know what it is. And I have to deal with it. After the fights, I'm depressed. I have two characters. Tyson Fury as a man is very flawed. But The Gypsy King is untouchable. He's never experienced a low time or depression or anxiety. Never had suicidal thoughts. When I return from that person and come back into myself, that's when I have trouble. Tyson Fury is a man, not a boxer."

***Photo by Sonya Jasinski***

**Anthony Joshua:** "This wasn't planned. I didn't start boxing when I was ten or eleven years old. I fell into this. At first, it was just a bit of fun. I wanted to get strong. I enjoyed it."

***Photo by Chris Floyd***



**Joe Calzaghe:** "There's always a temptation to fight, especially if you're the champ and no one has ever beaten you. But I'd come to a point where the satisfaction of retiring undefeated outweighed the thrill of another fight."

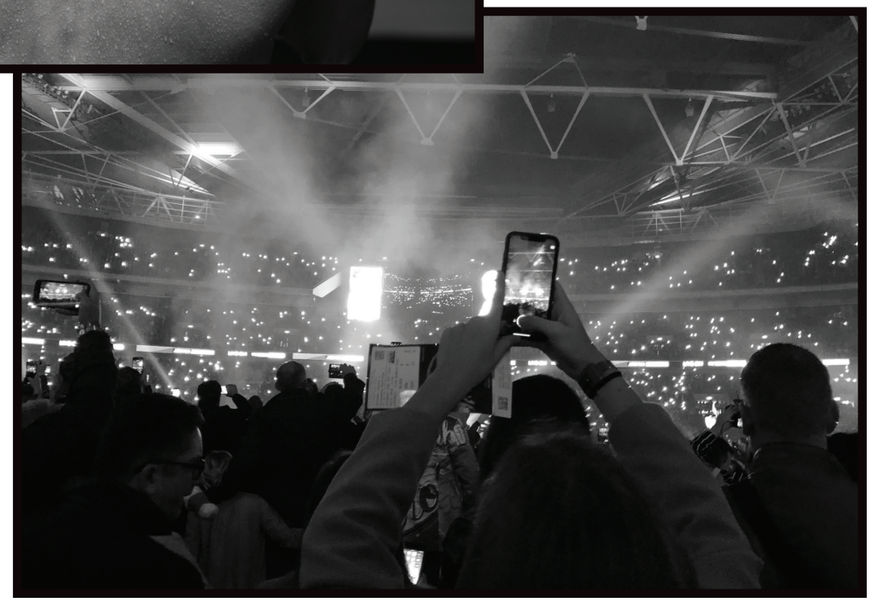
***Photo by Sonya Jasinski***

**Canelo Alvarez:**
Destiny
is not a matter of chance
It's a matter of choice
Life is hard but never give up
Keep on fighting &
always believe in yourself
to achieve your
Dreams

***Photo by Sonya Jasinski***

**Frank Warren:**
"My thing about boxing is never be disappointed about being disappointed. That's it. Get on with it. Take each day as it comes. Expect the unexpected."

***Photo by Sonya Jasinski***



# Ring Ratings

Through fights of February 15, 2025

**A year and a half after his loss to Naoya Inoue at 122 pounds, Stephen Fulton entered the featherweight ratings at No. 4 with a unanimous decision over WBC titleholder Brandon Figueroa, who was No. 6 at the time.**

## POUND FOR POUND LIST

1 **OLEKSANDR USYK**
Ukraine • 23-0-0 (14 KOs)

2 **NAOYA INOUE**
Japan • 29-0-0 (26 KOs)

3 **TERENCE CRAWFORD**
U.S. • 41-0-0 (31 KOs)

4 **ARTUR BETERBIEV**
Russia • 21-0-0 (20 KOs)

5 **DMITRY BIVOL**
Russia • 23-1-0 (12 KOs)

6 **JESSE RODRIGUEZ**
U.S. • 21-0-0 (14 KOs)

7 **CANELO ALVAREZ**
Mexico • 62-2-2 (39 KOs)

8 **GERVONTA DAVIS**
U.S. • 30-0-0 (28 KOs)

9 **JUNTO NAKATANI**
Japan • 29-0-0 (22 KOs)

10 **DEVIN HANEY**
U.S. • 31-0-0 (15 KOs)

### HEAVYWEIGHTS
*WEIGHT UNLIMITED*

C **OLEKSANDR USYK** RING, WBA, WBC, WBO
Ukraine • 23-0-0 (14 KOs)

1 **TYSON FURY**
U.K. • 34-2-1 (24 KOs)

2 **DANIEL DUBOIS** IBF
U.K. • 22-2-0 (21 KOs)

3 **JOSEPH PARKER**
New Zealand • 35-3-0 (23 KOs)

4 **ZHILEI ZHANG**
China • 27-2-1 (22 KOs)

5 **AGIT KABAYEL**
Germany • 25-0-0 (17 KOs)

6 **MARTIN BAKOLE**
Congo • 21-1-0 (16 KOs)

7 **ANTHONY JOSHUA**
U.K. • 28-4-0 (25 KOs)

8 **FILIP HRGOVIC**
Croatia • 17-1-0 (14 KOs)

9 **FABIO WARDLEY**
U.K. • 18-0-1 (17 KOs)

10 **EFE AJAGBA**
Nigeria • 20-1-0 (14 KOs)

### CRUISERWEIGHTS
*WEIGHT LIMIT: 200 POUNDS*

C **JAI OPETAIA** RING, IBF
Australia • 27-0-0 (21 KOs)

1 **GILBERTO RAMIREZ** WBA, WBO
Mexico • 47-1-0 (30 KOs)

2 **CHRIS BILLAM-SMITH**
U.K. • 20-2-0 (13 KOs)

3 **ALEKSEI PAPIN**
Russia • 18-1-0 (17 KOs)

4 **RICHARD RIAKPORHE**
U.K. • 17-1-0 (13 KOs)

5 **ARSEN GOULAMIRIAN**
France • 27-1-0 (19 KOs)

6 **MICHAL CIESLAK**
Poland • 27-2-0 (21 KOs)

7 **RYAN ROZICKI**
Canada • 20-1-1 (19 KOs)

8 **YAMIL PERALTA**
Argentina • 17-1-1 (9 KOs)

9 **BRANDON GLANTON**
U.S. • 20-2-0 (17 KOs)

10 **LEONARDO MOSQUEA**
France • 16-0-0 (9 KOs)

### LIGHT HEAVYWEIGHTS
*WEIGHT LIMIT: 175 POUNDS*

C **ARTUR BETERBIEV** RING, IBF, WBA, WBC, WBO
Russia • 21-0-0 (20 KOs)

1 **DMITRY BIVOL**
Russia • 23-1-0 (12 KOs)

2 **DAVID BENAVIDEZ**
U.S. • 30-0-0 (24 KOs)

3 **JOSHUA BUATSI**
U.K. • 19-0-0 (13 KOs)

4 **ANTHONY YARDE**
U.K. • 26-3-0 (24 KOs)

5 **ALBERT RAMIREZ**
Venezuela • 20-0-0 (17 KOs)

6 **CALLUM SMITH**
U.K. • 30-2-0 (22 KOs)

7 **OLEKSANDR GVOZDYK**
Ukraine • 20-2-0 (16 KOs)

8 **DAVID MORRELL**
Cuba • 11-1-0 (9 KOs)

9 **WILLY HUTCHINSON**
U.K. • 18-2-0 (13 KOs)

10 **IMAM KHATAEV**
Russia • 9-0-0 (9 KOs)

### SUPER MIDDLEWEIGHTS
*WEIGHT LIMIT: 168 POUNDS*

C **CANELO ALVAREZ** RING, WBA, WBC, WBO
Mexico • 62-2-2 (39 KOs)

1 **CHRISTIAN MBILLI**
France • 28-0-0 (23 KOs)

2 **DIEGO PACHECO**
U.S. • 23-0-0 (18 KOs)

3 **OSLEYS IGLESIAS**
Cuba • 13-0-0 (12 KOs)

4 **CALEB PLANT**
U.S. • 23-2-0 (14 KOs)

5 **WILLIAM SCULL** IBF
Cuba • 23-0-0 (9 KOs)

6 **VLADIMIR SHISHKIN**
Russia • 16-1-0 (10 KOs)

7 **BRUNO SURACE**
France • 26-0-2 (5 KOs)

8 **JAIME MUNGUIA**
Mexico • 44-2-0 (35 KOs)

9 **EDGAR BERLANGA**
U.S. • 22-1-0 (17 KOs)

10 **ERIK BAZINYAN**
Canada • 32-1-1 (23 KOs)

### MIDDLEWEIGHTS
*WEIGHT LIMIT: 160 POUNDS*

C **(VACANT)**

1 **ZHANIBEK ALIMKHANULY** IBF, WBO
Kazakhstan • 16-0-0 (11 KOs)

2 **HAMZAH SHEERAZ**
U.K. • 21-0-0 (17 KOs)

3 **CARLOS ADAMES** WBC
Dom. Rep. • 24-1-0 (18 KOs)

4 **ERISLANDY LARA** WBA
Cuba • 31-3-3 (19 KOs)

5 **CHRIS EUBANK JR.**
U.K. • 34-3-0 (25 KOs)

6 **ETINOSA OLIHA**
Italy • 21-0-0 (9 KOs)

7 **KYRONE DAVIS**
U.S. • 19-3-1 (6 KOs)

8 **TROY ISLEY**
U.S. • 14-0-0 (5 KOs)

9 **SHANE MOSLEY JR.**
U.S. • 22-4-0 (12 KOs)

10 **DENZEL BENTLEY**
U.K. • 21-3-1 (17 KOs)

### JR. MIDDLEWEIGHTS
*WEIGHT LIMIT: 154 POUNDS*

C **(VACANT)**

1 **TERENCE CRAWFORD** WBA
U.S. • 41-0-0 (31 KOs)

2 **ISRAIL MADRIMOV**
Uzbekistan • 10-1-1 (7 KOs)

3 **BAKHRAM MURTAZALIEV** IBF
Russia • 23-0-0 (17 KOs)

4 **SEBASTIAN FUNDORA** WBC, WBO
U.S. • 21-1-1 (13 KOs)

5 **VERGIL ORTIZ**
U.S. • 22-0-0 (21 KOs)

6 **SERHII BOHACHUK**
Ukraine • 25-2-0 (24 KOs)

7 **TIM TSZYU**
Australia • 24-2-0 (17 KOs)

8 **CHARLES CONWELL**
U.S. • 21-0-0 (16 KOs)

9 **JESUS RAMOS**
U.S. • 22-1-0 (18 KOs)

10 **XANDER ZAYAS**
Puerto Rico • 21-0-0 (13 KOs)

### WELTERWEIGHTS
*WEIGHT LIMIT: 147 POUNDS*

C **(VACANT)**

1 **JARON ENNIS** IBF
U.S. • 33-0-0 (29 KOs)

2 **EIMANTAS STANIONIS** WBA
Lithuania • 15-0-0 (9 KOs)

3 **MARIO BARRIOS** WBC
U.S. • 29-2-1 (18 KOs)

4 **DAVID AVANESYAN**
Russia • 31-5-1 (19 KOs)

5 **BRIAN NORMAN JR.** WBO
U.S. • 26-0-0 (20 KOs)

6 **GIOVANI SANTILLAN**
U.S. • 33-1-0 (18 KOs)

7 **SHAKHRAM GIYASOV**
Uzbekistan • 16-0-0 (9 KOs)

8 **JIN SASAKI**
Japan • 19-1-1 (17 KOs)

9 **ALEXIS ROCHA**
U.S. • 25-2-1 (16 KOs)

10 **RAUL CURIEL**
Mexico • 15-0-1 (13 KOs)

### JR. WELTERWEIGHTS
*WEIGHT LIMIT: 140 POUNDS*

C **TEOFIMO LOPEZ** RING, WBO
U.S. • 21-1-0 (13 KOs)

1 **DEVIN HANEY**
U.S. • 31-0-0 (15 KOs)

2 **ALBERTO PUELLO** WBC
Dom. Rep. • 23-0-0 (10 KOs)

3 **RICHARDSON HITCHINS** IBF
U.S. • 19-0-0 (7 KOs)

4 **ARNOLD BARBOZA**
U.S. • 32-0-0 (11 KOs)

5 **JACK CATTERALL**
U.K. • 30-2-0 (13 KOs)

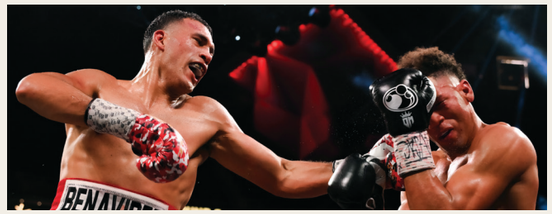
6 **LIAM PARO**
Australia • 25-1-0 (15 KOs)

7 **SUBRIEL MATIAS**
Puerto Rico • 21-2-0 (21 KOs)

8 **JOSH TAYLOR**
U.K. • 19-2-0 (13 KOs)

9 **ANDY HIRAOKA**
Japan • 24-0-0 (19 KOs)

10 **JOSE VALENZUELA** WBA
U.S. • 14-2-0 (9 KOs)



Fulton: Steve Marcus; Benavidez: Mikael Ona

### LIGHTWEIGHTS
*WEIGHT LIMIT: 135 POUNDS*

C **(VACANT)**

1 **GERVONTA DAVIS** WBA
U.S. • 30-0-0 (28 KOs)

2 **VASILIY LOMACHENKO** IBF
Ukraine • 18-3-0 (12 KOs)

3 **KEYSHAWN DAVIS** WBO
U.S. • 13-0-0 (9 KOs)

4 **SHAKUR STEVENSON** WBC
U.S. • 22-0-0 (10 KOs)

5 **WILLIAM ZEPEDA**
Mexico • 32-0-0 (27 KOs)

6 **RAYMOND MURATALLA**
U.S. • 22-0-0 (17 KOs)

7 **ANDY CRUZ**
Cuba • 5-0-0 (2 KOs)

8 **FRANK MARTIN**
U.S. • 18-1-0 (12 KOs)

9 **DENYS BERINCHYK**
Ukraine • 19-1-0 (9 KOs)

10 **TEVIN FARMER**
U.S. • 33-7-1 (8 KOs)

### JR. LIGHTWEIGHTS
*WEIGHT LIMIT: 130 POUNDS*

C **(VACANT)**

1 **EMANUEL NAVARRETE** WBO
Mexico • 39-2-1 (32 KOs)

2 **O'SHAQUIE FOSTER** WBC
U.S. • 23-3-0 (12 KOs)

3 **ANTHONY CACACE** IBF
Ireland • 23-1-0 (8 KOs)

4 **LAMONT ROACH** WBA
U.S. • 25-1-1 (10 KOs)

5 **JOE CORDINA**
U.K. • 17-1-0 (9 KOs)

6 **ROBSON CONCEICAO**
Brazil • 19-3-1 (9 KOs)

7 **EDUARDO NUNEZ**
Mexico • 27-1-0 (27 KOs)

8 **ALBERT BATYRGAZIEV**
Russia • 11-0-0 (8 KOs)

9 **EDUARDO HERNANDEZ**
Mexico • 36-2-0 (32 KOs)

10 **ALBERT BELL**
U.S. • 26-0-0 (9 KOs)

### FEATHERWEIGHTS
*WEIGHT LIMIT: 126 POUNDS*

C **(VACANT)**

1 **ANGELO LEO** IBF
U.S. • 25-1-0 (12 KOs)

2 **RAFAEL ESPINOZA** WBO
Mexico • 26-0-0 (22 KOs)

3 **NICK BALL** WBA
U.K. • 21-0-1 (12 KOs)

4 **STEPHEN FULTON** WBC
U.S. • 23-1-0 (8 KOs)

5 **REY VARGAS**
Mexico • 36-1-1 (22 KOs)

6 **LUIS ALBERTO LOPEZ**
Mexico • 30-3-0 (17 KOs)

7 **BRANDON FIGUEROA**
U.S. • 25-2-1 (19 KOs)

8 **MIRCO CUELLO**
Argentina • 15-0-0 (12 KOs)

9 **BRUCE CARRINGTON**
U.S. • 14-0-0 (8 KOs)

10 **ROBEISY RAMIREZ**
Cuba • 14-3-0 (9 KOs)

### JR. FEATHERWEIGHTS
*WEIGHT LIMIT: 122 POUNDS*

C **NAOYA INOUE** RING, IBF, WBA, WBC, WBO
Japan • 29-0-0 (26 KOs)

1 **MARLON TAPALES**
Philippines • 39-4-0 (20 KOs)

2 **MURODJON AKHMADALIEV**
Uzbekistan • 13-1-0 (10 KOs)

3 **SAM GOODMAN**
Australia • 19-0-0 (8 KOs)

4 **LUIS NERY**
Mexico • 35-2-0 (27 KOs)

5 **ALAN PICASSO**
Mexico • 31-0-1 (17 KOs)

6 **SHABAZ MASOUD**
U.K. • 14-0-0 (4 KOs)

7 **TJ DOHENY**
Ireland • 26-5-0 (20 KOs)

8 **ELIJAH PIERCE**
U.S. • 20-2-0 (16 KOs)

9 **RAMON CARDENAS**
U.S. • 26-1-0 (14 KOs)

10 **SEBASTIAN HERNANDEZ**
Mexico • 18-0-0 (17 KOs)

# RING RATINGS THROUGH FIGHTS OF FEBRUARY 15, 2025

## BANTAMWEIGHTS
*WEIGHT LIMIT: 118 POUNDS*

- **C (VACANT)**
- **1 JUNTO NAKATANI** WBC
  Japan • 29-0-0 (22 KOs)
- **2 RYOSUKE NISHIDA** IBF
  Japan • 10-0-0 (2 KOs)
- **3 SEIYA TSUTSUMI** WBA
  Japan • 12-0-2 (8 KOs)
- **4 YOSHIKI TAKEI** WBO
  Japan • 10-0-0 (8 KOs)
- **5 TAKUMA INOUE**
  Japan • 20-2-0 (5 KOs)
- **6 EMMANUEL RODRIGUEZ**
  Puerto Rico • 22-3-0 (13 KOs)
- **7 JASON MOLONEY**
  Australia • 27-3-0 (19 KOs)
- **8 DAVID CUELLAR**
  Mexico • 28-0-0 (18 KOs)
- **9 DAIGO HIGA**
  Japan • 21-3-1 (19 KOs)
- **10 JEYVIER CINTRON**
  Puerto Rico • 13-1-0 (6 KOs)

## JR. BANTAMWEIGHTS
*WEIGHT LIMIT: 115 POUNDS*

- **C JESSE RODRIGUEZ** RING, WBC
  U.S. • 21-0-0 (14 KOs)
- **1 FERNANDO MARTINEZ** WBA
  Argentina • 17-0-0 (9 KOs)
- **2 JUAN FRANCISCO ESTRADA**
  Mexico • 44-4-0 (28 KOs)
- **3 KAZUTO IOKA**
  Japan • 31-3-1 (16 KOs)
- **4 PHUMELELE CAFU** WBO
  South Africa • 11-0-3 (8 KOs)
- **5 KOSEI TANAKA**
  Japan • 20-2-0 (11 KOs)
- **6 CARLOS CUADRAS**
  Mexico • 43-5-1 (28 KOs)
- **7 ANDREW MOLONEY**
  Australia • 27-4-0 (17 KOs)
- **8 SRISAKET SOR RUNGVISAI**
  Thailand • 58-6-1 (47 KOs)
- **9 DAVID JIMENEZ**
  Costa Rica • 16-1-0 (11 KOs)
- **10 PEDRO GUEVARA**
  Mexico • 42-5-1 (22 KOs)

## FLYWEIGHTS
*WEIGHT LIMIT: 112 POUNDS*

- **C (VACANT)**
- **1 ANGEL AYALA** IBF
  Mexico • 18-0-0 (8 KOs)
- **2 KENSHIRO TERAJI** WBC
  Japan • 24-1-0 (15 KOs)
- **3 SEIGO YURI AKUI** WBA
  Japan • 21-2-1 (11 KOs)
- **4 GALAL YAFAI**
  U.K. • 9-0-0 (7 KOs)
- **5 RICARDO SANDOVAL**
  U.S. • 26-2-0 (18 KOs)
- **6 FELIX ALVARADO**
  Nicaragua • 42-4-0 (35 KOs)
- **7 ANTHONY OLASCUAGA** WBO
  U.S. • 8-1-0 (6 KOs)
- **8 FRANCISCO RODRIGUEZ JR.**
  Mexico • 39-6-1 (27 KOs)
- **9 TOBIAS REYES**
  Argentina • 16-1-1 (15 KOs)
- **10 YANKIEL RIVERA**
  Puerto Rico • 7-0-0 (3 KOs)

## JR. FLYWEIGHTS
*WEIGHT LIMIT: 108 POUNDS*

- **C (VACANT)**
- **1 MASAMICHI YABUKI** IBF
  Japan • 17-4-0 (16 KOs)
- **2 SHOKICHI IWATA** WBO
  Japan • 14-1-0 (11 KOs)
- **3 SIVENATHI NONTSHINGA**
  S. Africa • 13-2-0 (10 KOs)
- **4 CARLOS CANIZALES**
  Venezuela • 27-3-1 (19 KOs)
- **5 ADRIAN CURIEL**
  Mexico • 25-6-1 (5 KOs)
- **6 THANONGSAK SIMSRI**
  Thailand • 37-1-0 (33 KOs)
- **7 CRISTIAN ARANETA**
  Philippines • 25-2-0 (20 KOs)
- **8 REGIE SUGANOB**
  Philippines • 16-1-0 (6 KOs)
- **9 ERICK ROSA**
  Dom. Rep. • 8-0-0 (2 KOs)
- **10 ELWIN SOTO**
  Mexico • 21-3-1 (13 KOs)

## STRAWWEIGHTS
*WEIGHT LIMIT: 105 POUNDS*

- **C OSCAR COLLAZO** RING, WBA, WBO
  U.S. • 11-0-0 (8 KOs)
- **1 MELVIN JERUSALEM** WBC
  Philippines • 23-3-0 (12 KOs)
- **2 PEDRO TADURAN** IBF
  Philippines • 17-4-1 (13 KOs)
- **3 KNOCKOUT CP FRESHMART**
  Thailand • 25-1-0 (9 KOs)
- **4 YUDAI SHIGEOKA**
  Japan • 9-1-0 (5 KOs)
- **5 GINJIRO SHIGEOKA**
  Japan • 11-1-0 (9 KOs)
- **6 WILFREDO MENDEZ**
  Puerto Rico • 19-3-1 (6 KOs)
- **7 HASANBOY DUSMATOV**
  Uzbekistan • 6-0-0 (5 KOs)
- **8 DIANXING ZHU**
  China • 14-1-0 (12 KOs)
- **9 SIYAKHOLWA KUSE**
  S. Africa • 8-2-1 (4 KOs)
- **10 YUNI TAKADA**
  Japan • 16-8-3 (6 KOs)

## HOW OUR RATINGS ARE COMPILED
*RECORDS PROVIDED BY BOXREC.COM*

Championship vacancies can be filled in the following two ways: 1. The Ring's Nos. 1 and 2 contenders fight one another. 2. If the Nos. 1 and 2 contenders choose not to fight one another and No. 1 fights No. 3, that matchup could be for the Ring title if the Editorial Board deems No. 3 worthy.

A champion can lose their belt in six situations: 1. The Champion loses a fight in the weight class in which they are champion; 2. The Champion moves to another weight class; 3. The Champion does not schedule a fight in any weight class for 18 months, although injuries and certain other unforeseen circumstances could be taken into consideration; 4. The Champion does not schedule a fight at their championship weight for 18 months (even if they fight at another weight); 5. The Champion does not schedule a fight with a Top-5 contender from any weight class for two years; 6. The Champion retires.

The Ring Editorial Board considers input from the Ratings Panel of boxing journalists from around the world and then decides collectively what changes will be made. That applies to both the pound-for-pound and divisional ratings.



# Women's Ring Ratings THROUGH FIGHTS OF FEBRUARY 10, 2025

## SUPER MIDDLEWEIGHTS
*WEIGHT LIMIT: 168 POUNDS*

- **C SAVANNAH MARSHALL** RING, IBF
  U.K. • 13-1-0 (10 KOs)
- **1 FRANCHON CREWS-DEZURN** WBA, WBC
  U.S. • 9-2-0 (2 KOs)
- **2 SHADASIA GREEN** WBO
  U.S. • 15-1-0 (11 KOs)
- **3 LANI DANIELS**
  New Zealand • 11-2-2 (1 KO)
- **4 MARY CASAMASSA**
  U.S. • 6-0-0 (1 KO)
- **5 CITLALLI ORTIZ**
  Mexico • 4-1-0 (1 KO)

## MIDDLEWEIGHTS
*WEIGHT LIMIT: 160 POUNDS*

- **C CLARESSA SHIELDS** RING, WBA, WBC
  U.S. • 16-0-0 (3 KOs)
- **1 DESLEY ROBINSON**
  Australia • 9-3-0 (3 KOs)
- **2 MELINDA WATPOOL**
  Canada • 7-1-0 (2 KOs)
- **3 MAPULE NGUBANE**
  S. Africa • 14-9-3 (3 KOs)
- **4 ADRIANA DOS SANTOS ARAUJO**
  Brazil • 6-3-0 (1 KO)
- **5 CHLOE CHAOS**
  Australia • 5-1-1 (3 KOs)

## JR. MIDDLEWEIGHTS
*WEIGHT LIMIT: 154 POUNDS*

- **C. (VACANT)**
- **1 OSHAE JONES** IBF
  U.S. • 8-0-0 (3 KOs)
- **2 CECILIA BRAEKHUS**
  Norway • 38-2-1 (9 KOs)
- **3 FEMKE HERMANS**
  Belgium • 18-5-0 (7 KOs)
- **4 MARY SPENCER** WBA
  Canada • 9-2-0 (6 KOs)
- **5 PRISCILLA PETERLE**
  France • 11-0-0 (3 KOs)

## WELTERWEIGHTS
*WEIGHT LIMIT: 147 POUNDS*

- **C LAUREN PRICE** RING, WBA
  U.K. • 8-0-0 (2 KO)
- **1 NATASHA JONAS** IBF, WBC
  U.K. • 16-2-1 (9 KOs)
- **2 MIKAELA MAYER** WBO
  U.S. • 20-2-0 (5 KOs)
- **3 SANDY RYAN**
  U.K. • 7-2-1 (3 KOs)
- **4 MICHAELA KOTASKOVA**
  Czech Rep. • 9-0-2 (4 KOs)
- **5 STEPHANIE AQUINO**
  Puerto Rico • 8-0-0 (2 KOs)

## JR. WELTERWEIGHTS
*WEIGHT LIMIT: 140 POUNDS*

- **C KATIE TAYLOR** RING, IBF, WBA, WBC, WBO
  Ireland • 24-1-0 (6 KOs)
- **1 CHANTELLE CAMERON**
  U.K. • 20-1-0 (8 KOs)
- **2 SAMANTHA WORTHINGTON**
  U.S. • 11-0-0 (7 KOs)
- **3 FLORA PILI**
  France • 10-0-0 (1 KO)
- **4 ELIZABETH OSHOBA**
  Nigeria • 8-0 (5 KOs)
- **5 ELHEM MEKHALED**
  France • 17-3 (3 KOs)

## LIGHTWEIGHTS
*WEIGHT LIMIT: 135 POUNDS*

- **C. (VACANT)**
- **1 CAROLINE DUBOIS** WBC
  U.K. • 10-0-1 (5 KOs)
- **2 BEATRIZ FERREIRA** IBF
  Brazil • 6-0-0 (2 KOs)
- **3 TERRI HARPER** WBO
  U.K. • 15-2-2 (6 KOs)
- **4 RHIANNON DIXON**
  U.K. • 10-1-0 (1 KO)
- **5 MAIRA MONEO**
  Uruguay • 15-2-0 (3 KOs)

## JR. LIGHTWEIGHTS
*WEIGHT LIMIT: 130 POUNDS*

- **C ALYCIA BAUMGARDNER** RING, IBF, WBA, WBC, WBO
  U.S. • 15-1-0 (7 KOs)
- **1 DELFINE PERSOON**
  Belgium • 49-3-0 (19 KOs)
- **2 BO MI RE SHIN**
  South Korea • 18-2-3 (10 KOs)
- **3 LEILA BEAUDOIN**
  Canada • 12-1-0 (1 KO)
- **4 JENNIFER MIRANDA**
  Spain • 12-0-0 (1 KO)
- **5 MEA MOTU**
  New Zealand • 20-1-0 (8 KOs)

## FEATHERWEIGHTS
*WEIGHT LIMIT: 126 POUNDS*

- **C AMANDA SERRANO** RING, WBA, WBO
  Puerto Rico • 47-3-1 (31 KOs)
- **1 SKYE NICOLSON** WBC
  Australia • 12-0-0 (1 KO)
- **2 NINA MEINKE** IBF
  German • 19-3-0 (4 KOs)
- **3 SARAH MAHFOUD**
  Denmark • 15-2-0 (3 KOs)
- **4 DANIELA BERMUDEZ**
  Argentina • 32-5-3 (12 KOs)
- **5 RAVEN CHAPMAN**
  U.K. • 9-1 (2 KOs)

## JR. FEATHERWEIGHTS
*WEIGHT LIMIT: 122 POUNDS*

- **C ELLIE SCOTNEY** RING, IBF, WBO
  U.K. • 10-0-0 (0 KOs)
- **1 YAMILETH MERCADO** WBC
  Mexico • 24-3-0 (5 KOs)
- **2 SEGOLENE LEFEBVRE**
  France • 19-1-0 (1 KO)
- **3 NAZARENA ROMERO** WBA
  Argentina • 14-0-2 (8 KOs)
- **4 ERIKA CRUZ-HERNANDEZ**
  Mexico • 17-2-1 (3 KOs)
- **5 MIKIAH KREPS**
  U.S. • 9-0-0 (3 KOs)

## BANTAMWEIGHTS
*WEIGHT LIMIT: 118 POUNDS*

- **C DINA THORSLUND** RING, WBC, WBO
  Denmark • 23-0-0 (9 KOs)
- **1 YULIAHN LUNA AVILA**
  Mexico • 27-4-1 (4 KOs)
- **2 CHERNEKA JOHNSON** WBA
  Australia • 16-2-0 (6 KOs)
- **3 NINA HUGHES**
  U.K. • 6-1-0 (2 KOs)
- **4 SHURRETTA METCALF** IBF
  U.S. • 14-4-1 (2 KOs)
- **5 MIYO YOSHIDA**
  Japan • 17-5-0 (0 KOs)

## JR. BANTAMWEIGHTS
*WEIGHT LIMIT: 115 POUNDS*

- **C (VACANT)**
- **1 MIZUKI HIRUTA** WBO
  Japan • 7-0-0 (2 KOs)
- **2 CARLA MERINO**
  Argentina • 16-2-0 (4 KOs)
- **3 GINNY FUCHS**
  U.S. • 4-0-0 (1 KO)
- **4 ADELAIDA RUIZ**
  U.S. • 16-1-1 (8 KOs)
- **5 ASLEY GONZALEZ** WBC
  Mexico • 17-2 (7 KOs)

## FLYWEIGHTS
*WEIGHT LIMIT: 112 POUNDS*

- **C GABRIELA FUNDORA** RING, IBF, WBA, WBC, WBO
  U.S. • 15-0-0 (7 KOs)
- **1 GABRIELA ALANIZ**
  Argentina • 15-2-0 (6 KOs)
- **2 MARLEN ESPARZA**
  U.S. • 15-2-0 (1 KO)
- **3 KENIA ENRIQUEZ**
  Mexico • 28-1-0 (11 KOs)
- **4 ARELY MUCINO**
  Mexico • 32-5-2 (11 KOs)
- **5 IBETH ZAMORA**
  Mexico • 33-8-0 (13 KOs)

## JR. FLYWEIGHTS
*WEIGHT LIMIT: 108 POUNDS*

- **C (VACANT)**
- **1 EVELIN BERMUDEZ** IBF, WBO
  Argentina • 20-1-1 (7 KOs)
- **2 KIM CLAVEL**
  Canada • 20-2-0 (3 KOs)
- **3 SARA BAILEY** WBA
  Canada • 5-0 (0 KOs)
- **4 LOURDES JUAREZ** WBC
  Mexico • 37-4-0 (4 KOs)
- **5 ANABEL ORTIZ**
  Mexico • 34-7-0 (4 KOs)

## STRAWWEIGHTS
*WEIGHT LIMIT: 105 POUNDS*

- **C (VACANT)**
- **1 YOKASTA VALLE** WBC
  Costa Rica • 32-3-0 (10 KOs)
- **2 SARAH BORMANN** WBO
  Germany • 19-1-0 (7 KOs)
- **3 YUKO KUROKI**
  Japan • 24-8-2 (10 KOs)
- **4 SOL CUDOS**
  Argentina • 9-0-2 (3 KOs)
- **5 SOL BAUMSTARH**
  Argentina • 12-6-1 (8 KOs)

## ATOMWEIGHTS
*WEIGHT LIMIT: 102 POUNDS*

- **C TINA RUPPRECHT** RING, WBA, WBC, WBO
  Germany • 14-1-1 (3 KOs)
- **1 SUMIRE YAMANAKA** IBF
  Japan • 8-0-0 (3 KOs)
- **2 ERI MATSUDA**
  Japan • 7-2-1 (1 KO)
- **3 ESNEIDY RODRIGUEZ OLMOS**
  Mexico • 9-0-1 (0 KOs)
- **4 FABIANA BYTYQI**
  Czech Republic • 21-1-2 (5 KOs)
- **5 NAO UGAWA**
  Japan • 6-0-0 (0 KOs)

## POUND FOR POUND LIST

1. **CLARESSA SHIELDS** U.S. • 15-0-0 (3 KOs)
2. **KATIE TAYLOR** Ireland • 24-1-0 (6 KOs)
3. **CHANTELLE CAMERON** U.K. • 20-1-0 (8 KOs)
4. **AMANDA SERRANO** Puerto Rico • 47-3-1 (31 KOs)
5. **DINA THORSLUND** Denmark • 23-0-0 (9 KOs)
6. **GABRIELA FUNDORA** U.S. • 15-0-0 (7 KOs)
7. **YOKASTA VALLE** Costa Rica • 32-3-0 (10 KOs)
8. **ALYCIA BAUMGARDNER** U.S. • 15-1-0 (7 KOs)
9. **NATASHA JONAS** U.K. • 16-2-1 (9 KOs)
10. **MIKAELA MAYER** U.S. • 20-2-0 (5 KOs)

# Iyana "Right Hook Roxy" Verduzco

**Age:** 23
**Hometown:** Los Angeles
**Weight Class:** Featherweight
**Height:** 5-foot-4
**Stance:** Orthodox
**Amateur Record:** 101-6
**Turned Pro:** 2023
**Pro Record:** 3-0 (1 KO)
**Trainer:** Gloria Alvarado
**Promoter:** 360 Promotions
**Instagram:** @righthookroxy

**BEST NIGHT:** In January against Lindsey Ellis, Verduzco put her foot on the gas and never let up, stopping her foe in the third round. It's almost like we're seeing Verduzco adding more tools to her attack with each fight, and in this one with Ellis, she was more consistent with her aggression, her body work was impressive, and she showed zero respect for what Ellis was throwing back at her. Just a complete effort, and one that came just two months after surgery to remove her appendix and a week after having to evacuate her home in Glendale due to the wildfires that hit the Los Angeles area. She admits that she had a few butterflies stepping into the ring at Commerce Casino that night.

"I've been testing it in sparring and been getting hit in the body and, at first, I was like, 'Oh, OK, that's a little uncomfortable.' (laughs) But I think I got to the point where I got used to it. And [Ellis] wasn't a power puncher, but I obviously was looking out for my health. I do worry, and I was just making sure, like, 'I'm here. I'm actually walking on the stage right now with all the trials and tribulations I had this whole camp. I'm actually here, and now I just have to shine and use my skill.'"

**WORST NIGHT:** With a perfect pro record and a trio of dominant wins, Verduzco hasn't had a bad night as a pro yet. But if we have to find something, I'd have to look at her nine-fight run in the Team Combat League. Verduzco went 8-1 for the Los Angeles team while fighting in a promotion that features one-round fights, and in her lone loss to New York's Jaica Pavilus in May 2023, her cautious approach cost her when she allowed Pavilus back into the fight after dominating the opening moments. Verduzco still should have received the nod on the scorecards, but Pavilus' rally earned her a split decision win. It is key to note that Verduzco was still transitioning to the pro game that she wouldn't officially enter for another five months.

"I would say my amateur career was very serious to me, but I feel like it's a lot different now in the pros," Verduzco said. "It's not a game. Boxing's a very selfish sport. You have to hold your composure more, and I had to change my style a bit from the amateurs to the pros. Yes, I do have some amateur style in my pro fights, but again, you have to sit down on your punches. I would say you have to be perfect. But I feel like the experience I had as an amateur in high-level competitions has helped me in the pros. … I know what it feels like to be on a big stage and with a lot of pressure and high expectations."

**WHAT'S NEXT:** Verduzco is tentatively scheduled to return to Commerce Casino on April 19 against an opponent to be determined. Her coach (and mom), Gloria Alvarado, a respected trainer who guided Yokasta Valle to multiple world titles, promises something special.

"I'm just anxious for everyone to see her at 100%," said "Coach G." "She's unstoppable at 100%. You guys have only seen her in three fights, and I'm not saying she doesn't train to be 100%, but things happen and we had a lot of things happen to us, like health issues and surgeries. But we fought through it, and she put on an amazing performance [against Ellis], just like all the other times."

**WHY SHE'S A PROSPECT:** When I asked Tom Loeffler, head of 360 Promotions, why fans should pay attention to "Right Hook Roxy," the industry veteran didn't mince words:

"With only three fights, Roxy has one of the highest upside potentials I've seen of a young female athlete, both in the ring and outside the ring," he said. "She has a tremendous social media following and reaction to her fights leading up to fight night, and then during fight night, her performances in the ring are definitely going to put her on the fast track to becoming a world-rated fighter. And then challenging for a world title."

That's high praise. And with an extensive amateur background, youth and a willingness to learn and work hard, Verduzco has all the tools to make a run at a world title. Her power and speed won't wow anybody, but she's a sharp and accurate puncher, her footwork is great, and her defense is improving with each bout. But her most telling attribute may be her Fight IQ. Against wild and awkward opponents, she has read them well, stayed patient and made them pay for ill-advised rushes. As her level of competition improves, her ring smarts will pay off even more.

The featherweight division is stacked, though, but if she's moved properly and not too fast, she could be challenging for a belt in a couple years. And who better to move her than Loeffler, who has worked with the likes of Cecilia Braekhus, Lucia Rijker, Seniesa Estrada and Laila Ali?

**WHY SHE'S A SUSPECT:** Verduzco lacks one-punch stopping power and possesses less-than-blazing speed, although she is gaining the kind of experience that should gradually improve her ring generalship. In her second fight, she was already in six-rounders, and she expects eight-rounders sooner rather than later. When you consider her fan following, marketability and the reality that women are moved faster than their male peers in the U.S., there's a distinct possibility of "too much, too soon" creeping in.

Alvarado believes her daughter can take on the best in the division tomorrow, but she's also wise enough to let Loeffler and his team take the reins when it comes to the future. Because as much of an upside as Verduzco has, she's not ready for the likes of Amanda Serrano yet.

"But I leave it up to our promotion and Tom and [360 Promotions' director of operations] Mike [Stiles]," Alvarado said. "They're doing an amazing job with her. And I know they know what they're doing. That's the reason why we signed with them. They're going to push her through everything they have to get her to be undisputed in multiple divisions."

And to add to the good news from the Verduzco camp, the one with the gloves on isn't in a rush.

"A lot of people make the mistake of moving too fast, and they end up becoming a one-hit wonder," Verduzco said. "That's not what I want to do. I want to be known for years and years, and I definitely have the resume and I have the pedigree. But I'm going to take my time, and I'm going to do it the right way."

**STORYLINES:** How much time do you have? Everybody in this business has a story, but Verduzco's is better than most. The member of a fighting family that includes a kickboxing legend in uncle Benny "The Jet" Urquidez and another combat sports legend in her late aunt, California Boxing Hall of Fame member Lily Rodriguez, Verduzco was practically born with gloves on. She started in the sport at 4 and had her first fight at 8, and though she had dreams of competing in the 2020 Olympics, missing the cut for Team USA and then seeing the COVID-19 pandemic put a halt to everything else left her wondering whether she was going to continue her career in the ring.

"After all those years, I did lose my spark a bit," Verduzco said. "I was already hitting my early twenties during COVID, and I just thought, 'Do I want to do this?' And I sat there. I did a lot of other sports, and I was a very athletic person. I did softball, track and field – you name it, I did it. But I started letting people get in my head, and during COVID, everything shut down and I got too comfortable. But I got my spark back. I lived in Mexico during that time, and I just felt like I needed that break to really figure out who I am and who I was. And boxing was what I knew. I did do some college classes, but I knew that with boxing, I've been doing this so long that I can't just throw it out the window. And I fell in love with the sport again. And now here I am."

There aren't too many 23-year-old pros with 3-0 records who have over 102,000 followers on Instagram. But she's not shocked at how her story has resonated with her fans.

"I'm definitely not surprised," she said. "I'm really grateful for all the support and love. But I've been around for a really long time, so everyone was just more expecting me [to turn pro]. (laughs) They were expecting me to jump to the pros from the amateurs right away, and I had taken some time off. So everyone was just really just excited to see me in the pro ranks now." RING

CRIS ESQUEDA/GOLDEN BOY

## SCOUTING REPORT CARD

**Amateur pedigree: 10**
With over 100 amateur wins and a host of national titles, Verduzco was close to earning a spot on the 2020 U.S. Olympic team. This makes her one of the more accomplished United States amateurs to make it to the pro ranks, and it gives her an edge over most of the opposition she'll be facing.

**Punching power: 5**
She has decent pop in her right hand, hence the "Right Hook Roxy" moniker, but she's not a one-punch knockout artist by any means. The knockouts she's going to get as a pro are going to result from an accumulation of blows, not one shot.

**Speed: 6**
She's not slow, but not blazingly fast either. Verduzco's footwork is going to cover that up, because she's already shown to be where she needs to be when she needs to be there.

**Skill: 8**
Her fundamentals are solid, and that technique will allow her to go far. Maybe most impressive in her arsenal is the deceptively effective defense that sees her deflect blows and lessen their impact when they do land.

**Pro Ceiling: 9**
If moved properly, she'll be a champion in a couple years or at least in the mix among the elite at featherweight and above. Add in all the intangibles, and the potential for her to be a crossover star is there as well.

**Total (out of 50): 38**

# IN THE NAME OF THE FATHERS

THE APRIL 26 SHOWDOWN BETWEEN **CHRIS EUBANK JR.** AND **CONOR BENN** CONTINUES THE FIERY FEUD STARTED BY THEIR LEGENDARY FATHERS 35 YEARS AGO

**By Gareth A Davies**

Maud SAKRI

MirrorPix

It is special, this. Special for this publication as the first Ring Magazine-branded event, but special too in terms of the chances of it ever occurring. The sons of a famous boxing rivalry fighting each other is very, very rare, if not unheard of. And certainly so with such an outstanding and dark rivalry repeating itself. Let us be honest for a moment before we dive deep into what this contest is, will be, and what it represents. And indeed, what is on the line when the first bell tolls for Chris Eubank Jr. and Conor Benn at Tottenham Hotspur Stadium in London on April 26.

The deepest truth we must admit, the baseline for this battle, is that the collision of Benn and Eubank Jr. is a fight based on the blood spilled and reputation of their fathers. Two great fighters who left so much of themselves in the ring at a different time in the sport. A harsher time ...

There will never be a greater truth than that. Obviously, the sons would never be here without their fathers, but moreover, this contest would not be happening had it not been for the deep, almost hateful warrior rivalry between their much-admired old men.

In bare terms, it would be meaningless outside the auspices of a bankable promotion – some will even call it critically a "money grab" around a bloodline feud stretching back 35 years. Bloodline, bloodlust. In purist boxing terms, they are miles apart.

And yet it is still so, so compelling. A fight that is big business. A fight that crosses over into the mainstream in British life. This event will bring together fans from multiple generations in a fight drawing nostalgia from the well. A well replete with blood thicker than water. The buildup to April 26 is mouthwatering.

And so, so unusual. I can remember covering what we called "Ali vs. Frazier 4" when the daughters of Muhammad Ali and Joe Frazier fought in a tented arena in Verona, New York, with their fathers there in attendance in June 2001. It was a huge event at the time, pitting Laila Ali, a rare star in women's boxing, against Jacqui Frazier-Lyde, an attorney who liked to put the gloves on.

It was an all-action thriller.

At the time, having attended the event, I wrote, "The bout, staged in an 8,000-seat marquee in Verona, lasted 16 minutes. Spurned by many boxing purists and labeled 'the battle of Dames with Names,' it turned out to be a no-holds-barred scrap with Frazier-Lyde, then a 39-year-old Philadelphia lawyer and mother of three, taking the fight to 23-year-old Ali before losing on points [majority decision]. As Joe Frazier himself said after the fight, 'There's a lot of daddy in Jacqui.' Muhammad Ali, also there, just smiled."

Genuinely it was thrilling to be there and be involved. My sense is that "Benn-Eubank 3" will create the same buzz.

If that was American royalty and rivalry, then we now have the equivalent and history repeating itself in British boxing. We need to recall those events, which began in 1990 and garnered millions of viewers, between two of the most popular British fighters ever.

There was no love lost after the first fight, in which Eubank took Benn's WBO middleweight title, stopping him in the ninth round in 1990.

Three years later in the return bout, in October 1993, many observers saw Benn as dominant, but the fight – a WBC/WBO super middleweight title unification bout in front of 42,000 fans at Old Trofford in Manchester – was controversially judged a split draw. That night was called "Judgement Day." We are there again now in 2025.

Back then, all those years ago, there was a genuine animosity between the two men, which led to a classic first encounter and a memorable rematch, both of which were laced with more enmity and hatred than any rivalry in British boxing history.

Benn was admired as an old-school warrior who had served in the British Army in "The Troubles" in Northern Ireland. He carried his heart on his sleeve, an emotional character.

In the opposing corner, Eubank was very different: He

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Maud SAKRI



was brash, he was flash, and he carried an air of arrogance, playing the heel inside and outside the ropes. Eubank was content to be the rogue. He had referred to boxing as "a mug's game."

They were sons of the first mass wave of immigrants from the Caribbean. Benn, the Dark Destroyer, was of Bajan heritage, Eubank of Jamaican lineage. The clash of chemistry went from the boots to their heads.

Fascinatingly, there are similar traits that characterize the sons, both as fighters and personalities. Eubank Jr., a middleweight and super middleweight campaigner, has always espoused a less-is-more approach – at 35 years old, he has 37 fights on his record, with three defeats. The very big fights – notably those teased with Canelo Alvarez and Gennadiy Golovkin – have been close but never got over the line. His defeats have come to Liam Smith (stoppage, which he avenged in a rematch), George Groves (unanimous decision), and Billy Joe Saunders (split decision). He has been within touching distance of a world title, yet it has never been in his grasp.

Eubank is a clever salesman, a smart thinker, and knows his worth. This is a very, very big fight for him against Benn. Obviously, as the naturally bigger man, there is more at stake for him in terms of legacy and reputation. Not to mention family pride, which we will return to shortly. In spite of his age – and despite the fact that he was stopped for the first time in his career by Smith, dramatically and emphatically in the fourth round in Manchester two years ago – Eubank starts as the favorite.

With the bout set at middleweight, the rehydration clause allows him an upper limit of 170 pounds the day after the weigh-in, which could – just could – affect him if it is a long and grueling contest with Benn.

Eubank, The Ring's No. 5-rated middleweight, was ranked No. 3 with the IBF and No. 2 by the WBC at 160 pounds as this piece was penned; Benn, meanwhile, in spite of his inactivity, sits at No. 2 with the WBA, No. 3 with the WBC and No. 4 with the IBF in the welterweight division.

Benn, 28 years old, will likely be challenging for 147-pound world titles in the next 12 months. But first the family feud, a huge sporting event in the U.K., in a magnificent stadium that has already seen world title fights involving Tyson Fury vs. Derek Chisora and Anthony Joshua vs. Oleksandr Usyk. The stadium was alive on these great occasions.

The Benn-Eubank legacy fight has had two and a half years to marinate since it was first made official in August 2022, and with the clash postponed from October 2022 due to Benn testing positive for a performance-enhancer called clomifene, the clearing of his name and lifting of a suspension on his license in the U.K. saw the resonance of this fight increase exponentially. It has a narrative that has continued to grow.

A deus ex machina in the form of the most influential figure in modern boxing also entered the scene as the two fighters wrangled over the purse split, arguing over parity and who held the cards as the A-side. Eubank insisted it was him; Benn said that he just wanted the fight; their respective promoters, Ben Shalom and Eddie Hearn, laid out their reasons for their men. It looked like the fight was going nowhere when Turki Alalshikh stepped in, set up the deal and made it a Ring Magazine event, the first of what he promises will be many.

Parallels can easily be drawn with the Benn and Eubank of today and the two warriors from many years ago.

Speaking in the first week of February, Conor Benn, with both passion and emotion, told The Ring: "Look, this is the greatest British rivalry. It's something that hasn't been done before. Two world champions' sons in the greatest of British rivalries. As well as making history, and the magnitude of it, this is the fight that is capturing the imagination of the public."

He added: "It's all well and good winning a world title, and it's every fighter's dream to do so, but you can't turn down fights of this magnitude. For me, it's a great draw for me, and I love the challenge of jumping up two weight divisions to show how good I am. I'm loving the anticipation of it, and to sell out Tottenham Stadium is something you can tick off in your career. These opportunities don't come around often, and I want to give my entire body and soul to it."

I discussed with Benn how it has morphed into an even bigger fight, event and rivalry over the last 30 months. "Listen, I've been extremely inactive, but I've stayed in the gym," he said. "I've stayed extremely disciplined and used the time wisely. Come April 26, you will see a better version of myself, a more filled-out version of myself, and the time away has given me a different mindset and resilience."

Historically, moreover, the Benn family has been on the cover once, in 1991, under the headline "Boxing's Baddest Bad Boy: Nigel Benn plays by his own rules."

"I think I have a copy ... It's a picture of him hitting the speedball, isn't it? I do think I have a copy," said Benn excitedly. "To be involved in the first Ring Magazine event is history all-round, an absolute blessing, and it means so much. This is the DNA that my father has passed on to me ... You say it has been building for the past two and a half years, but this [fight] has had 35 years worth of building ... so to have both of me and Eubank here to make this happen, to agree to what works for both of us to be headlining the first Ring Magazine show, what a blessing!"

Benn goes on, gathering steam, his passion for the battle brimming over. "You know ... I feel like this was always fate ... this was destiny. If the fight had happened before [as scheduled in October 2022], it would not be as big. It would not be on the Ring Magazine cover. So it feels like it fell at the right time or even perfect time.

"It's a blessing to make history, a blessing to be a part of history. I'll be showing my son and my kids, as my dad did with me ... that this is generational. When you think Ring Magazine, you think boxing, and when you think boxing, you think Ring Magazine – over one hundred years of history on the sport.

"Love it or hate it, with a fight of this magnitude there is always going to be controversy. The controversy sells. Over the past two and a half years – the catchweight, the names, the personalities – there are so many different boxes that have been ticked ... but all that matters for me now is that I come out with the 'W' on April 26."

At this point, and full disclosure here, Eubank failed to respond after two weeks of me asking his PR team and promoters to speak with us for this article in late January and early February – putting the interview on hold, yet teasing it might happen. In so many ways, that is typical Eubank. He won't be budged from his road; he won't give an inch. If it does not suit him, he ain't doing it.

Disappointing, but Eubank has always played a game of hard to get, and perhaps that is why he has succeeded in the poker playing in Las Vegas, which is well-documented. And in being a box-office success, beating the "mug's game," as his father called the industry, with an elite-level earning career without ever being a world champion – remarkable, really.

I have interviewed Eubank Jr. many, many times, have a great relationship with him, but on this one, there was radio silence. He has kept his views on Benn simple, though. Far from complimentary. Eubank says the fight will be "savage," and called his opponent and promoter Eddie Hearn "rats." Eubank said it was "business" ahead of the postponed contest but that the hate is now real, and that it is "personal, very personal."

To be sure, the nation will be divided. But Eubank has always been cold, calm and calculated in his career. It matters not if he has to be the figure of hate for the fans in this one. For the sake of the bloodline connection, however, the sense is that Eubank knows he MUST win this battle.

But just listen to the emotional Benn speak. How does the pressure affect him?

"Excuse my language, but fuck the noise. Let's just get in there and fight,"

**Eubank Jr. stopped Kamil Szeremeta in seven.**

Mark Robinson

**Benn battered Peter Dobson over 12 rounds.**

Ian Maule

Benn said. "I don't look at it as more pressure on me. For whatever people want to say that's negative about this fight, there ain't no pressure.

"Ultimately, I'm a fighter – I live for this. I was born for this. This is what I was made to do. I wasn't raised a fighter. There is no reason why I have as much fight in me as I do ... apart from me being my father's son. And you can say the same about Eubank. The apple doesn't fall far from the tree. Which is why the fight sells."

But is there more hate now, for Benn as well?

"Definitely," Benn said without hesitation. "Having the 'W' over a Eubank is something we always wanted – every day of the week ... and the drive is there to win the family battle. On a more personal level, the last three years have left a bad taste in my mouth, and I have taken it personally. We are two different personalities. And that's that, There's a personality clash there. I don't really have anything left to say to him.

Here, it is plain and simple for Benn. He wants a war. From the first bell. Route one.

"I'm going to bash his head in on April 26. There ain't nothing else to say ... that's it. You never hear my dad once saying [anything] about me jumping up two weight divisions to 160 ... and you have Senior moaning about his son fighting at his own weight ... I'm not actually sure whether from Senior that is a dig at Eubank Jr. or whether it's a compliment to me ... I'm undecided on it.

"But my dad will be with me in the corner; he will be with me my whole camp. At the press conference, my dad is my right-hand man.

"There is no pressure on me from my dad. Ultimately, I don't care what Eubank does, how Eubank prepares. If he wants to come and meet me in the middle, if he wants to box and move, it doesn't change my strategy or mindset. It's never mattered to me what my opponents do. It's always 'What can Conor Benn do? What does Conor Benn do well?' It's never what my opponents do."

Again, so much like father, like son with the Benns. Nigel Benn told me a few years back: "When he was a kid, I saw a lot of my traits in Conor that I didn't like. We have a better relationship now than we ever had. A lot of things I've done wrong, I apologized for. The kind of life I led really affected my family. And he said: 'I'll never be like you.' When you hear that from your son, you think: 'Thank you, Lord, that he's not like me.'"

That is in life, but in the ring?

"Inside the ring, though, he's doing better than I did. I see him going all the way."

Well, this is that moment, perhaps, where Benn has the opportunity to surpass his father. Not in terms of world title glory, but everlasting glory for the family.

This Benn-Eubank fight isn't just a sporting event; it's a culmination of decades of drama, a clash molded and shaped from chaos, intrigue and controversy, and a narrative that has transcended the boundaries of boxing.

And when the dust settles, only one man will emerge from the wreckage of the fight, with reputation either tarnished or reborn. The world will be watching this fight, this event. It is unmissable. RING

# GOLIATH

"MEXICAN MONSTER" **DAVID BENAVIDEZ** TAKES DOWN ANOTHER TOP-RATED CONTENDER WHILE IN PURSUIT OF LIGHT HEAVYWEIGHT SUPREMACY

**By Keith Idec**

Sye Williams

Replay made it obvious to everyone except the Nevada State Athletic Commission officials at ringside that David Benavidez's left leg got tangled with David Morrell Jr.'s right leg in the 11th round of their light heavyweight fight on February 1 at T-Mobile Arena.

In real time, Thomas Taylor called it a knockdown for Morrell after Benavidez fell to the canvas. It was an honest mistake that understandably occurs sometimes when even the most effective referees are positioned on the opposite side of what he or she needs to see.

For reasons unclear to anyone with working eyes, that mistake was upheld between the 11th and 12th rounds of a competitive, entertaining battle between two terrific unbeaten contenders in their physical primes.

Benavidez didn't get tripped up by embracing a high-risk, low-reward endeavor that most ascending fighters would have avoided, however. A few minutes later, ring announcer Jimmy Lennon Jr. verified that Benavidez had beaten Morrell in their 12-round, 175-pound bout – undoubtedly the most arduous assignment of the Phoenix native's 11-year, 30-fight pro career – by at least four points, according to judges Tim Cheatham (118-108), Patricia Morse Jarman (115-111) and Steve Weisfeld (115-111).

Cheatham credited Benavidez for winning 11 of 12 rounds. The Ring's No. 2 contender in the light heavyweight division acknowledged that their back-and-forth fight was closer than that.

"He hits harder than everybody I've faced … he's a good fighter," Benavidez said. "But I think just my experience alone, I've seen so much different styles. You know, I've seen Caleb Plant, Demetrius Andrade, [Oleksandr] Gvozdyk, Anthony Dirrell. So, I mean, I'm just getting better and better. But the dude was good. He fucking brought it until the 12th round … I just showed what level I'm on."

The 28-year-old Benavidez's underrated defensive skills enabled him to block some of Morrell's harder shots with his gloves. He remained mindful, however, that the Cuban southpaw was dangerous right up until the final bell.

Morrell (11-1, 9 KOs) seemed to affect Benavidez most with the right hook he landed long after the bell sounded to end the 11th round. That flagrant foul, an instinctual response to Benavidez hitting him late also, cost Morrell the point he gained by recording the aforementioned knockdown.

Neither fighter faulted the other for what transpired after the bell rang following the 11th round. They instead exhibited mutual respect that was absent during the boorish buildup to Premier Boxing Champions' Prime Video pay-per-view main event.

> "I'm just getting better and better … I just showed what level I'm on."

Seven weeks after Morrell threw his secondary WBA belt at Benavidez during a skirmish at a press event in Miami, Benavidez gave that belt back to him during their post-fight press conference. Sanctioning organizations generally allow ex-champions to keep their belts and send newly crowned champions their own in the weeks or months following a title victory.

"I knew it was gonna be a hard fight," Benavidez said. "That's why I trained extremely hard. You know, we were talking a lotta shit. But at the end of the day … we sold the shit out of the fight. You know, a lotta people wanted to see [it]. A lotta people bought pay-per-view. And it was a great fight. … I don't know what percentage I landed at, but I landed a lot, you know, against a great fighter."

In fact, Benavidez landed 224 of 553 punches overall (40.5%), 59 more than Morrell (165 of 601), according to CompuBox's unofficial statistics. CompuBox counted more power punches (181 of 378 to 136 of 423) and more jabs (43 of 175 to 29 of 178) for Benavidez, who learned during 12-round unanimous decision victories over Plant, Andrade and Gvozdyk how to properly pace himself by taking a more measured approach.

"Forty-one?" Benavidez asked of his overall connect percentage. "Pretty good – that's really good. And I don't think I got hit that much, either."

Overcoming Morrell made Benavidez the WBA and WBC's mandatory challenger for the immediate rematch between Ring Magazine light heavyweight champ Artur Beterbiev and former WBA titleholder Dmitry Bivol on February 22 at Kingdom Arena in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia.

The Russian-born, Montreal-based Beterbiev (21-0, 20 KOs) is scheduled to defend his full collection of 175-pound titles versus Bivol (23-1, 12 KOs). Beterbiev beat Bivol, a longtime resident of Russia, by majority decision on October 12 at Kingdom Arena to become the first undisputed light heavyweight champion of the four-belt era.

Turki Alalshikh, owner of The Ring and chairman of Saudi Arabia's General Entertainment Authority, invited Benavidez (30-0, 24 KOs) to sit ringside for the stacked seven-fight pay-per-view show headlined by Beterbiev-Bivol.

"I definitely would love to go," Benavidez said. "You know, I would love to fight those guys. That's what I'm

**A sustained and pulverizing body attack was a key part of the Benavidez offense in Las Vegas**

Sye Williams

here for. ... Every fight – I feel like every fight that I take is gonna be the hardest fight ever, until the next fight.

"And that's how it should be, because we're going up in competition, we're going up against the best of the best. If you look at my track record now, I have a pretty good resume. Not pretty good – I have a *really* good resume. So, every fighter I'm going up against is better than the last one, and you know, I'm happy I'm able to show what level I'm on. And I'm happy to continue to progress in my career."

The GEA has enabled Alalshikh to pay Beterbiev and Bivol eight-figure purses apiece for back-to-back bouts. Benavidez would like to reap the financial benefits of the Saudis' vast investment in boxing, but he also appreciates that he has developed a fan base in Las Vegas.

A paid crowd in excess of 12,000 attended the Benavidez-Morrell card at T-Mobile Arena, home of the NHL's Golden Knights. Each of Benavidez's previous three fights took place in Las Vegas. He has established himself as a ticket-seller in his hometown of Phoenix as well.

Beterbiev, a slight favorite to beat Bivol again, is a proven box office draw in Montreal, where he has lived since 2013, and Quebec City. If Beterbiev were to remain unbeaten, a fight with Benavidez would make more money in Las Vegas than anywhere in Quebec – if, that is, it were to take place away from Riyadh, the Saudi capital that the GEA promotes as an attractive destination for tourists from the United States, United Kingdom and elsewhere.

"I feel like it would sell more here, to be honest with you," Benavidez said in reference to Las Vegas. "That's the one thing: They talk about Turki Alalshikh and they say, 'Would you ever fight with them over in Riyadh?' But, at the end of the day, you know, my fan base is here in Las Vegas. I'm a Las Vegas fighter. You know what I mean? I would love to go over there and fight, but this is my market right here.

"And I feel like we did really well. We just sold [well at] T-Mobile Arena. ... It was a dream come true to me. You know what I mean? And I just wanna take advantage of this market, because I've worked 11 years [for this] – this is my first time having a freakin' crowd like that, so I just, I wanna stay here.

**Benavidez still craves career-defining fights despite all the belts.**

Mikael Ona





And I think that fight would be even bigger here, to be honest with you."

Beterbiev-Benavidez definitely would be a bigger event than Benavidez-Morrell in the U.S., because Morrell entered the ring with only 11 fights on his professional record. He went 12 rounds in unanimous decision wins against Guyana's Lennox Allen in August 2020 and Serbia's Radivoje Kalajdzic prior to facing Benavidez. Yet the 27-year-old Miami resident realized he would take a significant step up in opposition by battling Benavidez, whom he had called out for more than two years.

Ultimately, Benavidez's experience edge factored into the outcome of the biggest fight of Morrell's five-year professional career.

"We prepared well," Morrell said. "It didn't go like we wanted, like we expected. ... The only thing that's left is to learn from it, move on and be better next time."

Benavidez expected better technique from Morrell, yet Morrell demonstrated that he has the power, size, skill and chin to beat most light heavyweights, maybe every competitor not named Beterbiev, Bivol or Benavidez.

The winner was simply pleased that he atoned for what he considers a subpar performance against Ukraine's Gvozdyk. Benavidez beat the former WBC light heavyweight champ by unanimous decision in their 12-round bout on the Gervonta Davis-Frank Martin undercard last June, but injuries to both hands nevertheless prevented Benavidez from boxing better that night.

The two-time WBC super middleweight beltholder still won comfortably on the cards of judges Dave Moretti (117-111), Don Trella (119-109) and Zachary Young (116-112).

Benavidez feels he made more of a statement against a younger, fresher fighter in Morrell.

"[Morrell] didn't say nothing [at the press conference], because he knows that my punching power's real," Benavidez said. "He knows every time I get in there with a fighter, [lumped up is] exactly how they leave, just exactly like that. ... I was mad because Gvozdyk didn't leave like that. He didn't really seem as hurt as all these other fighters, but because my hands were injured. So now that my hands are good, you know, now you see the power of David Benavidez is real."

Benavidez believes he surprised Morrell by how well he dealt with his left-handed opponent's athleticism and movement. His father and trainer, Jose Benavidez Sr., joked that his son showed he was also a better dancer when he responded to Morrell's showboating with an "Ali Shuffle" of his own.

> "I feel like people, when they fight me, they don't think I'm as good as I am ... so they kinda mess themselves up like that."

"Well, I feel like people, when they fight me, they don't think I'm as good as I am," Benavidez said. "They don't think I have defense; they don't think I [can] box; they don't think I have a jab, so they kinda mess themselves up like that. But as soon as I started touching that body, I touched the left hook to the body and I heard him [say], 'Ugh.' So as soon as that opened up, I knew everything else was gonna open up.

"And just the thing was me keeping my concentration for the whole fight, because ... he was throwing some good shots. So I was able to showcase my defense as well. I won every round, right? Or how much rounds did I win? Yeah, so it was a landslide. ... So if you can have a landslide against good fighters like that, I mean, it's pretty good on my end. ... So I'm really happy with the performance."

The multidimensional Morrell entered their bout rated eighth among The Ring's light heavyweight contenders, mostly due to his lack of pro experience and his recent move from super middleweight, where he was rated much higher.

While higher on the light heavyweight list, Benavidez has never appeared in The Ring's pound-for-pound rankings. "The Mexican Monster" is convinced that the impressive nature of this win should change the public's and pundits' perception of him as he hopefully positions himself to box Beterbiev or Bivol later this year.

"I think this puts me [on] the pound-for-pound list, probably number nine, 10," Benavidez said before correcting himself. "I mean, sixth?

"That's been something I've been trying, you know, to get on for a long, long time. And it just shows the progression of what I've [done] – the evolution of me being a fighter. ... So I'm excited to hopefully one day be number one."

Benavidez could crack and climb the pound-for-pound list by beating Saul "Canelo" Alvarez. He is certain that the Mexican superstar will continue avoiding him, however, especially now that Alvarez will face fellow four-division champion Terence Crawford on September 13 at Allegiant Stadium in Las Vegas.

"You guys keep asking me about that fight, and I know as much as you guys," Benavidez said. "I mean, I would love to fight Canelo. It would be a massive, massive fight. But Canelo says that he has other things [to do], and he says I'm being too mean in the way I'm approaching him. So, you know what I mean? I guess I gotta work on my attitude."

*Keith Idec is a senior writer and columnist for The Ring. He can be reached on X @idecboxing.*

# SLOW-COOKED SUPERFIGHT

EVERY SERIOUS FIGHT FAN WANTS TO SEE **NAOYA INOUE** FACE COUNTRYMAN **JUNTO NAKATANI**, BUT THE FIGHTERS ARE TAKING THE LONG ROAD TO GET THERE

**By Daisuke Sugiura**

Naoki Fukuda

Naoki Fukuda

**As was the case at bantamweight, Naoya Inoue holds undisputed gold at junior featherweight.**

Everyone expected Naoya Inoue to demolish late substitute Ye Joon Kim on January 24, but the fourth-round KO was still an impressive performance by "The Monster." In his first fight of 2025, Inoue once again demonstrated the strength, speed, skill and power that spawned his moniker, easily defended his Ring, IBF, WBA, WBC and WBO junior featherweight titles in front of a packed house at Ariake Arena in Tokyo.

Sam Goodman, the IBF and WBO mandatory challenger, had to cancel the fight due to two sparring injuries to his left eye, and Korea's Kim (21-3-2, 12 KOs) was selected as a substitute. But the difference in strength and overall level was clear from the beginning, and Inoue, with his record of 29-0 (26 KOs), continues to march forward on an uncharted road.

"My new opponent [accepted the assignment] 10 days before the fight. I feel a lot of love from everyone. I appreciate it," Inoue said in the ring after the victory. "Overall, I think it was a good fight. I didn't have enough time to study my opponent, so I just took time to see what was coming from him."

Kim connected with some solid punches during the first few rounds, but in the fourth, the Japanese hero weakened the challenger with a powerful body shot and finished him off with a devastating one-two combination, resulting in a KO that thrilled the crowd of about 15,000.

After being repeatedly hurt in the fourth, Kim made a defiant gesture with his gloves, as if to say "bring it on," but that attitude only hastened the end of the fight. Inoue's knockout power and ever-present precision impressed three-division titleholder Junto Nakatani.

"Kim was trying to force Inoue to react by changing his head position and making quick movements, and he actually landed some good punches at the right times," Nakatani (29-0, 22 KOs) told The Ring. "But, still, Inoue was Inoue. He was thoroughly in control of the fight, taking the initiative and landing the punches he wanted to land. In terms of tactics against southpaws, Inoue used jabs a lot this time."

The clash between Inoue and Nakatani has become one of the dream matchups that boxing fans are looking forward to, not only in Japan but all over the world. Inoue has been leading the way in Japanese boxing and has established himself as one of the best pound-for-pound fighters in the sport. However, the southpaw Nakatani has also shown remarkable growth. An increasing number of fans and fighters believe that the 26-year-old champion, who still shows no signs of weakness, will be the biggest threat to Inoue. The question now is when this coveted match will take place.

**"I HAVE A LOT OF RESPECT AND ADMIRATION FOR INOUE. HE SETS THE BAR HIGH."**

Trainer Rudy Hernandez, who has been coaching Nakatani since he was a teenager, appreciates Inoue but is eager to help his pupil conquer The Monster.

"I have a lot of respect and admiration for Inoue. He sets the bar high," Hernandez told The Ring. "We are not there yet. We'd like to surpass Inoue one day, but right now, he's number one. Junto is getting better, and so far only 70% of his full potential showed up. One day we have to fight Inoue to be the best – hopefully at the end of this year, because it's at the right moment."

However, it seems likely that it will be some time before the showdown between Inoue and Nakatani takes shape. It's being viewed by some American media and fans as the "Super Bowl of Japanese boxing," but, in reality, Nakatani is still far behind Inoue in terms of popularity and name recognition in Japan. Nakatani, who has won at flyweight, junior bantamweight and bantamweight, has already earned the respect of the industry, but he still needs more casual fan appeal in order to make the Inoue bout a legitimate superfight in Japan.

Nakatani will defend his WBC bantamweight title for the third time on February 24 in Tokyo. His opponent is Mexican contender David Cuellar (28-0, 18 KOs), The Ring's No. 8-rated bantamweight. This fight was selected as the main event at Ariake Arena, but former kickboxing superstar Tenshin Nasukawa, who will face former bantamweight beltholder Jason Moloney in the co-featured bout, is still better-known to the general Japanese public. We can even make a case for Luis Nery, who challenged Inoue last May, being more well-known among Japanese sports fans than Nakatani due to the Mexican's checkered past with Japanese boxing.

So it is understandable that the Inoue vs. Nakatani fight is not being considered for the foreseeable future. Nakatani is expected to first pursue a 118-pound title unification fight.

Takuma Inoue, the younger brother of Naoya Inoue who held the WBA bantamweight title until October of last year, would have been the perfect opponent for Nakatani. If Nakatani had Takuma's scalp on his resume, the strong storyline of Naoya seeking revenge for his younger brother would undoubtedly raise domestic attention on their eventual showdown. However, Takuma lost a decision to Seiya Tsutsumi, so

Nakatani's immediate challenge is to decide who among the all-Japanese bantamweight world titleholders – Tsutsumi (WBC), Yoshiki Takei (WBO) and Ryosuke Nishida (IBF) – he can face in a unification fight.

"There has been a lot of talk about our head-to-head matchup, and lately I've been watching Inoue's fights while imagining what it would be like if I were to face him. [But] I think my fight against Inoue will be sometime next year," Nakatani admitted. "To fight on an equal footing with Inoue, I need to have a lot of skills up my sleeve, and I need to improve the accuracy of each of them."

Again, based on what we've heard from both camps, it seems likely that we'll have to wait until 2026 for the Japanese megafight, but don't be discouraged. At 31, even after winning more than 20 world title fights and breaking his own Japanese record with 10 consecutive knockout wins with major belts on the line, Inoue still wants to get back in the ring more often and has some exciting plans for 2025.

At press time, the plan was for Inoue to fight the WBC's No. 1 contender, Alan Picasso (No. 5 in The Ring's rankings) in May, and then WBA mandatory challenger Murodjon "MJ" Akhmadaliev in the fall. It makes sense geographically to fight Picasso (31-0-1, 17 KOs) in Las Vegas and Akhmadaliev (13-1, 10 KOs) in Saudi Arabia.

Top Rank, which represents both Inoue and Nakatani in the U.S., is putting a lot of promotional and marketing muscle behind Inoue's return to Las Vegas. His first fight in the U.S. since 2021 is sure to be a big event and will require a venue that can accommodate more than 10,000 people, with the T-Mobile Arena and MGM Grand Garden Arena among the candidates.

**Nakatani decks challenger Petch Sor Chitpattana in Tokyo.**

Naoki Fukuda

"Another great performance by our champion here," Top Rank Chairman Bob Arum said in the ring after the Inoue-Kim fight. "I observed that the great country of Japan has given [baseball player Shohei] Ohtani to Los Angeles. And at least for one fight, the great country of Japan will give the great Inoue to the city of Las Vegas this spring."

The rangy, 5-foot-8 Picasso, who is studying for a master's degree in neuroanatomy at Universidad Nacional Autonoma de Mexico, is popular in his country as an intellectual boxer. His breakout fight was last August, when





he defeated Armenia's rugged Azat "Crazy A" Hovhannisyan, who had also sparred with Inoue. And according to an insider, if Canelo Alvarez decides not to appear in the ring in May, the fight between Inoue and Picasso may take place on Cinco de Mayo weekend. Other dates being considered include May 17 and May 31.

Inoue will be a huge favorite, but American fans and media will be excited by The Monster's first appearance in an American ring in a long time. And, of course, Picasso's camp doesn't expect their young fighter to lose easily, even if the opponent is Japan's premier champion.

"Picasso is definitely a lead candidate for Inoue's next opponent, so let's see what will happen. It's on the table," Rene Aviles, who promotes Picasso for Zanfer Promotions, told The Ring. "Obviously Picasso is not as powerful as Inoue, but he's a very clever boxer. Picasso's chance is outboxing Inoue. Let's see if he can accomplish that. He definitely won't knock Inoue out, so he has to outbox him. We know the odds are against us, but we also believe Picasso has a shot. At the very least, we have a much better shot than this last challenger, Kim."

If Inoue prioritizes a fight with Picasso, Eddie Hearn of Matchroom Boxing, who wants Inoue vs. Akhmadaliev to happen sooner, may ask the WBA to strip Inoue of that title. If that happens, MJ will be promoted from interim to full titleholder. The Inoue-Akhmadaliev fight may be a bit political and become a "unification" fight. Or Hearn and Akhmadaliev, albeit reluctantly, might step aside one last time.

Assuming Inoue wins those two fights, his camp is considering moving up to featherweight at the end of the year and fighting Nick Ball. One of the key players is Saudi Arabia's Turki Alalshikh, who is eager to see a fight between Inoue and Ball (21-0-1, 12 KOs). If Inoue challenges Britain's gutsy WBA featherweight beltholder, he will be attempting to become a five-division world titleholder, having previously won major belts at junior flyweight and junior bantamweight, and becoming undisputed at bantamweight and junior featherweight.

That, again, doesn't mean the aforementioned fight with Nakatani will be shelved. For now, the plan for Inoue is to only fight one time at featherweight and then return to the junior featherweight division.

"I plan to have four fights this year," Inoue told the Japanese media at a press conference the day after the Kim fight. "I think [my conditioning would allow me to] move up to the featherweight division and still drop back down to [the 122-pound division]."

Inoue, who entered the ring against Kim at his heaviest weight to date, 138.6 pounds, has no intention of avoiding a fight with Nakatani. Hideyuki Ohashi, president of Ohashi Gym and Inoue's promoter in Japan, feels the same way, and he explains Inoue's future plans as follows: "Even if Naoya moves up to featherweight and beats Ball, he will have to go back to [122], because there still will be an opponent he needs to fight there."

Of course, it's unclear whether things will go as smoothly as planned, but Inoue's camp has a blueprint for the next four fights. In the boxing world, looking too far into the future is no good, but if anyone can do that, it might be The Monster.

Picasso, Akhmadaliev, Ball and Nakatani. Inoue's brilliant career is probably drawing to an end, but the biggest challenges are yet to come. RING

**Possible Inoue opponents Alan Picasso (top left), Murodjon Akhmadaliev (middle right) and Nick Ball (bottom left) in recent fights.**

(Top to Bottom) Christian Petersen; Mark Robinson; Lewis Storey

Kelly Gavin

# SQUARED CIRCLE LOVE TRIANGLE

AS EMOTIONAL AS HE IS TALENTED, **TEOFIMO LOPEZ** BLAMES FAMILY DRAMA FOR DISRUPTING HIS CAREER TRAJECTORY BUT SAYS HE'S BACK ON TRACK WITH A NEW TEAM, A BOLD PLAN AND REDEDICATION TO BOXING

**By Joseph Santoliquito**

Teofimo Lopez Jr. could only see out of his right eye. His left was a swollen, purplish mass following his first and only professional loss, a split decision to George Kambosos Jr. suffered just a few hours before. And now here he was, in the ICU of New York City's Bellevue Hospital, early Sunday morning, November 28, 2021.

He'd just had a heartbreaking revelation, triggered by a FaceTime argument with Cynthia, his then-wife who was not seated ringside that night inside the Hulu Theater at Madison Square Garden when he lost his Ring Magazine lightweight championship to the Australian underdog.

Lopez was angry over her absence. He has been boxing his whole life. It's a part of him, coursing through his bloodstream. But the love of his life, the mother of his son, seemed to care nothing about his boxing career or his many sacrifices.

Propped up in his hospital bed, Lopez just needed to see her, to hear why she was not there.

Four years later, driving through Las Vegas with his father, Teofimo Sr., "The Takeover" feels free.

No more anguish.

Now 27, and still very much in his prime, Lopez yearns for 2025 to be a huge year. Under new co-managers Mike Borao and Keith Connolly, Lopez is reportedly headed toward a unification bout with IBF junior welterweight titlist Richardson Hitchins this summer, followed by the winner of the April 12 Ring Magazine welterweight championship between IBF titleholder Jaron Ennis and WBA beltholder Eimantas Stanionis sometime in the fall of 2025. And after that, it could be the Devin Haney-Ryan Garcia rematch winner sometime in early 2026.

There are a lot of "ifs" in this bold plan, but Lopez's talent can never be counted out.

Lopez is, alongside Canelo Alvarez, one of only two active fighters to have beaten two Ring champions. He outpointed Vasiliy Lomachenko for the Ring lightweight title and three alphabet belts in October 2020, then stunned the boxing world again when he dominated Ring/WBO junior welterweight world champion Josh Taylor in June 2023, when many thought Lopez lacked the mental fortitude to beat the previously undefeated Scotsman.

Lopez (21-1, 13 KOs), the 2020 co-Fighter of the Year (shared with Tyson Fury), wants to rebuild everything he started with new people in a new year.

**"I [HAD] LOST THAT LOVE OF BOXING ... I HAD TO RETHINK A LOT OF THINGS AFTER THE CLAGGETT FIGHT."**

"You want to know what has changed me, what will fuck everyone in boxing now moving forward? My divorce," he said. "What hurt me was my wife – or ex-wife. She never cared about boxing. I had to get slapped across the face to find that out. My love and passion for boxing was replaced by my love and passion for a woman, and it hurt me.

"I remember sitting in the hospital bed in the ICU arguing with her on FaceTime why she never came to the [Kambosos] fight. She used the excuse that our son was just born – but there were always excuses. So I would go into the ring with her on my mind. That's dangerous. The change in my boxing is my divorce. Once that is finalized, everyone is fucked. All I am giving my complete love to is boxing. I'm throwing everything – who I am, what I am – into boxing."

There were "outside distractions" stemming from tension between his family and Cynthia during their five-year marriage, claims Lopez. He credits a brief separation for his fine performance against Taylor. But while his father remained in his corner, his relationships with his mother and sisters were strained for years.

"My choice was disowning my family, or choosing her," Lopez said. "That's what it came down to. My family tried to embrace her. I can tell you they tried. I should have listened to my mother."

Their legal separation started in June 2024, the month he defended his world championship against rugged fringe contender Steve Claggett. Lopez won a lopsided unanimous decision, but neither he nor his father was pleased with his performance, which many fans viewed as lackadaisical.

Teofimo Sr. implored his son to be more aggressive during the tepid 12-rounder but said his son was "questioning himself in the corner, and you can never have that in boxing."

"I [had] lost that love of boxing," said Lopez Jr. "I had to rethink a lot of things after the Claggett fight. My wife was killing me."

Brad Goodman, one of Top Rank's hall of fame matchmakers, calls bullshit on Lopez's excuse for his hot-and-cold ring appearances.

"His wife, or ex-wife, is not why he has had some subpar performances," said Goodman. "That's on him. He has the talent and ability to stop guys like Claggett, and he let [Claggett] stick around on a major platform set up for him. He needed to close the show. He didn't. He has to be accountable for that. When he's right, the boxing world knows what he can do. He's proven it.

Kelly Gavin

Jamie Squire

I've said it a million times: The only one who could get in his way is himself. He knows that."

## NEW MANAGEMENT

Early this year, Lopez separated from longtime manager David McWater, who was responsible for getting Lopez the Lomachenko fight, and partnered with the management team of Connolly and Borao. The Lopezes admired Connolly for the work he's done moving the careers of former middleweight titleholder Daniel Jacobs and super middleweight standouts Sergiy Derevyanchenko and Edgar Berlanga, as well as Hitchins.

"Those are two smart business guys who know the sport of boxing and know how to make their clients money," said Lopez Jr. It's no secret that Lopez has had a volatile relationship with Top Rank since the company signed him out of the amateurs in late 2016.

"This lifts another weight off of me," Lopez Jr. said. "I'm focusing on not having any contact with Top Rank. I'll let Keith and Mike handle that. I told Keith and Mike to do all the talking. I do see myself as a star. I expect to be treated like a star. I won't say anything about Top Rank, but the problem here is – his name rhymes with 'odd.' I don't think he likes me. I know he does not like us (Team Lopez). I don't think there is any question about it: We know it. All I can say is, 'God bless. May God bless 'Odd.'"

"Odd" is obviously Top Rank President Todd duBoef.

"No one here [at Top Rank] hates Teofimo," said Goodman. "We followed him since the amateurs, and I remember him turning pro. Boxing people said that they felt he was not all that, but I was actually impressed with his pro debut. I thought he showed a ton of composure, I know [Top Rank CEO] Bob [Arum] liked him. We signed him and moved him fast. He did not need to be groomed. We were always impressed with his ability. No, no one here hates him at all. We wish him all the best and we definitely want him to stay at Top Rank."

Armed with a background in finance, Connolly is a hard-nosed negotiator known for garnering his clients purses that they normally would not receive. He reportedly got Derevyanchenko more than $5 million to fight Gennadiy Golovkin in October 2019. He got limited heavyweight fringe contender Adam Kownacki a multimillion-dollar deal with Premier Boxing Champions, and he continues to handle the careers of Berlanga, Hitchins, Conor Benn, Alycia Baumgardner and Filip Hrgovic with aplomb.

"When you look at everything Teo has done, what is there not to like?" said Connolly. "He's done everything, and he is only 27. My first impressions of Teofimo are that he is very intelligent, misunderstood, a great personality for the sport, a pound-for-pound type of talent, and he is a polarizing figure, and I mean that in a good way. He is a combination of one of the most skilled and most charismatic figures in the sport."

One area that Connolly, Borao and Team Lopez all agreed on is that he has reached a stage in his career where he wants only big fights – and they believe he possesses the cachet to demand them.

It starts with Hitchins, who won the IBF 140-pound title by scoring a split decision over Liam Paro on December 7, 2024, in San Juan, Puerto Rico.

"We want to move Teo fast," said Connolly. "Big fights, and only big fights, are the priority. We are talking to Top Rank and the higher-ups in the Saudi Arabia group that has done so much for boxing. I would like to solve any problems he has with Top Rank, if any, and make big fights."

**"WHEN YOU LOOK AT EVERYTHING TEO HAS DONE, WHAT IS THERE NOT TO LIKE?"**

Getting past Hitchins to those big bouts won't be easy, according to Connolly.

"If Teo gets through the next three [planned bouts], he will be one of the biggest stars in the sport, if not the biggest. But I don't care what anyone says about Richardson; the guy is very hard to beat," he said. "Richardson can beat any 140-pound fighter in the world. It would be a very hard night for me if they do fight each other, but they both want the fight. My job is to give my fighters what they want."

## THE 'DREAM TEAM'

Lopez is talking to Canelo Alvarez's renowned trainer, Eddy Reynoso, and respected amateur coach Milton LaCroix about joining his team. Lopez Sr. will remain a vital part of the training camps, but Reynoso and LaCroix, who has worked with former heavyweight champ Shannon Briggs and recently Logan Paul, would be on hand to instill anything he misses.

"We are still talking right now," said Lopez Sr. "We don't know where this will go, because we need to sit down and create a collaborative group plan, but it is a dream team.' We need Eddy for special things. I think he can bring out even more power with my son. I'll be in charge of movement and placing, because I do know my son. Eddy and Milton will add a pair of experienced eyes that we respect. I cannot see everything. If I miss something, they will see it."

Lopez Sr. deserves credit for being willing to step aside, to a degree, to allow other voices to be heard.

"We had a couple of sessions with Eddy, and it was beautiful," he said. "This can be something special. Eddy will be our power guy, and Milton will be our finesse guy, polishing the speed side of my son's game. I will be the eyes and look over everything. We have a dream team, and we'll have fun."

For now, Lopez Jr. will play the maestro. He'll play to the crowd. He says he's far smarter than he lets on. It's something McWater picked up quickly, as did Borao and Connolly when they first met him.

"Let people think I'm a dumb fuck," said Lopez Jr. "I know I'm not. That's what is important. I'd rather not let people know how smart I am. I still look back at that night in the hospital [after the Kambosos fight] with the tubes in me and my family upset. I looked around to see who was there for me. That's what we were arguing over. Now I'm surrounded by people who will be there for me." RING

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*Joseph Santoliquito is an award-winning sportswriter and is the president of the Boxing Writers Association of America. Follow @JSantoliquito [twitter.com]*

# BUILT FOR BATTLE

**AFTER A BANNER 2024, FEATHERWEIGHT TITLEHOLDER NICK BALL – A PRODUCT OF LIVERPOOL'S MOST RESPECTED GYM – IS POISED FOR AN EVEN GREATER 2025**

**By John Evans**

It is a cold Friday morning in Liverpool, and one by one, the fighters file into the city's famous old Everton Red Triangle gym to finish off their first week's work of 2025.

They talk as they change into their training gear and make their way to an office where head trainer Paul Stevenson has a fight cued up on the computer.

Today's viewing is the exciting lightweight rematch between Edwin Rosario and Jose Luis Ramirez from 1984.

Once everybody has taken their seats, he hits play.

The gym is home to a number of established championship-level fighters, but although British and Commonwealth 118-pound titleholder Andrew Cain and junior featherweight up-and-comer Brad Strand chip in with the occasional thought or comment, they remain glued to the screen as Stevenson talks them through the action.

WBA featherweight titleholder Nick Ball sits quietly, watching the fight and wrapping his hands.

Once Ramirez has completed his unlikely comeback and snatched away Rosario's WBC title, the fighters make their way back into the gym to get ready for the morning's session.

"Every day we get in at 10 and watch the old fights. All different ones. We do that 'til 11 a.m., when we start training," Ball said.

"My favorite? We watch all different fighters. We've watched that many and we have different opinions on them but, overall, probably Mike Tyson for me. He's just got that style.

"Paul might be showing us what one fighter's doing in the ring with one shot, and then you go and do it on the bag. You might focus on just that one shot or all different things. That's the idea of it, really. To watch it and then take it into training and use it in our own way and the way Paul shows us."

"I'll pick quite specific ones for certain things," said Stevenson.

"You can look at one fight through a load of different lenses. Whether you're looking at it from the perspective of a challenger or an orthodox fighter or a tall fighter or whatever it is. That's just where I come in to get my points across to the boxers. It's hard to just tell you one thing, because it's very rich and varied what we do, but I believe in spending 25, 30 minutes each day [watching fights]. We might watch a fight over a week,

Maud SAKRI

just a little bit at a time, talking about it a bit each day. We look at different fighters and different situations that we have encountered and that we will encounter."

It shouldn't come as a surprise that Stevenson spends time teaching his fighters about the greats of bygone days and highlighting the techniques and tactics that made them so good.

The E.R.T. is a real boxing gym.

You won't see any short, Instagram-friendly bursts of pad work. The boxers won't spend 10 minutes posing in front of the mirror taking photos for their social media feeds once training is over.

Everything has a reason, everything is done with a purpose, and the boxers produced by Stevenson and his assistant, Anthony Humphreys, fight in the same way.

Ball is a product of his environment. Yes, being from inner city Liverpool has shaped the 28-year-old's unbothered outlook and character, and his short, powerful build is largely responsible for his aggressive style, but the E.R.T. has provided the ideal environment for him to develop into the fighter he has become.

"Nick was at the Kirkby Club. We had lads at his age going through the championships like Nick was, and I liked him because – back then, even – he was short and fast," Stevenson remembered.

"He's giving everything away in terms of height and reach to these big, lanky southpaws with England vests on, and he's really giving it to them.

"He stopped boxing when he was about 15, and then when he was about 18, 19, he came to see me and said he wanted to come here but that he wasn't interested in boxing amateur; he wanted to turn pro.

"No boxer I've ever trained has come in and been the perfect pro straight away. It takes time. But you know when you've got something to work with. Nick was a three-time national champ in the amateurs and just a fighter through and through.

"The first day I took him on the pads, I said, 'Well, you've come to the right place,' because I could just tell that I was going to be able to get something out of him with his abilities and the things he had. I could see straight away what was possible. He developed fast. After a year or two of working with him, getting him fights, keeping him busy, I just knew in my boots he was going to be a world champion."

"If you know boxing in this city, you know this gym is where it's happening," Ball said. "You don't know until you try something, but when I came here, it was just like, 'Don't look back; this is the place for me.'

"I fit in well, and the way Paul works and works with us all, it's proper. It's not nonsense. It's all business and proper stuff. You only have to be here to see that."

The walls of the E.R.T. are plastered with photographs of champions who have passed through the gym over the years. The current crop of fighters are quickly creating their own legacies, but if they ever need any further proof that Stevenson's system works, they need only look to the man hitting the bag or shadowboxing alongside them.

Almost every single opponent the all-action Ball has ever sparred or boxed has ducked between the ropes with the same foolproof plan to outbox him.

They only find out exactly what type of fighter he is once the bell rings, and they are quickly forced to rack their brains for a backup plan they never thought they would need.

Fighters from the gym don't tend to scream and shout about what makes them so successful – those secrets are kept within the gym's walls – but Ball wouldn't have reached the level he has if he were a one-dimensional pressure fighter.

He has spent years perfecting the intricacies that make his size his strength.

"From the outside looking in, it probably looks different, but when you're in there with me and you're feeling it and feeling the pace that I go at, it's different," Ball said. "My strength, my fitness – but it's not even just that; I can box as well. People underestimate my boxing skills. I've boxed loads of taller fighters and beaten them to the jab and things like that.

"No fighter out there trains like me. I'm doing it all year round so I can take that into the ring with me confidently knowing that I'm fitter and stronger and that I'll do whatever it takes to win more than them."

Although in some ways it suits Stevenson for people to continually underestimate Ball, he does feel like it is high time that people begin to look a little closer at just what it is he is doing.

They aren't the type of people to beg for attention, but there is a big difference between praise and recognition.

"People can look at a certain style and say, 'Oh, he does this wrong. He does that wrong. He does that well. He does this well,' and 99.9% of the time, they don't even know what they're looking at. They're probably missing nine-tenths of the iceberg," he said.

"A lot of the time, people think they know what they're going to do with a fighter like Nick or any fighter you mention in the world. They think, 'I know what he's going to do and I know how he does it,' and quite often they don't. They think they do in their arrogance, but there's a lot of cleverness that goes into what Nick's doing. … He's a very, very well-rounded boxer-puncher and a real force."

Stevenson – who also manages Ball – spent years refining his style, matching him smartly and ensuring that whenever an opportunity arrived, he would be ready to take it.

Ball has proven himself again and again, but the ease and speed at which he has established himself at world level has surprised almost everybody outside of the gym.

His outstanding run started back in November 2023 with a dominant decision victory over former 122-pound titleholder Isaac Dogboe.

Lewis Storey

**Ronny Rios succumbed to the Englishman's suffocating pressure.**

The breakthrough performance earned him a mandatory shot at WBC featherweight beltholder Rey Vargas on the undercard of the enormous Riyadh Season heavyweight showdown between Anthony Joshua and Francis Ngannou. Despite bullying the Mexican veteran and dropping him twice, the judges handed in a derided split draw.

Rather than stewing on the result, Ball got back in the gym.

Three months later he was back in Saudi Arabia for an even tougher looking test against the ambitious, talented southpaw Raymond Ford. Ball upped his performance accordingly, boxing and fighting his way to a split decision to rip away Ford's WBA title.

It was a show of mental strength and physical skill that earned him a nomination for The Ring Magazine's Comeback of The Year award.

He rounded out 2024 by turning back a determined effort from Ronny Rios, stopping the former world title challenger in 10 bloody rounds.

"Life-changing year, wasn't it? Ups and downs. Obviously everyone knew what happened with Vargas with the draw. I should be WBC champion. But I got another opportunity to become world champion, and I've done that. So it was a boss year for me," Ball said with typical understatement. He isn't the type to dwell on his achievements.

"You can, but only to a certain degree, because there's always more, isn't there? I've got my next fight coming, so I've got to focus on that."

It usually takes any sportsman time to feel like they belong at the highest level. If they have the talent, eventually the game begins to slow down.

Boxing is slightly different in that it also requires certain qualities that can't be taught or acquired through experience. Any weaknesses will only

be exposed once the opposition is good enough to exploit them.

Ball didn't take time to acclimatize to world level. He knew he belonged straight away.

"Honest opinion? Probably before I even got in the ring with them. Obviously you don't know until you do that, so when [I did it, I knew for sure]," he said.

"You've got to believe in yourself, always, and know that you belong at that level before you actually get there, and then work hard to get there. Then you've got to actually get in and do it to prove to people and prove to yourself.

"So I've done it in the style that I've done it, comfortably, and then obviously went on and fought other world champions.

"Any surprises? No. Every fight's different, so just focus on who I'm fighting and don't look ahead or anything like that. Just deal with what I've got to deal with and come out on top."

Ball produced a career-best performance to dethrone Raymond Ford.

Richard Pelham

Ball is preparing to make the second defense of his WBA title against Ireland's T.J. Doheny. The fight will take place at Liverpool's M&S Bank Arena on March 15. At the launch press conference, the fiery Irishman voiced his displeasure at a throwaway comment Ball made about him having quit during his seventh-round stoppage loss to undisputed Ring Magazine 122-pound champion Naoya Inoue last September.

"Some fighters have to do that to get themselves up for it, don't they? Doesn't matter really, does it?" said Ball. A shrug of the shoulders and a wrinkle of the nose do more to explain his feelings on the matter than any number of words could.

Inoue seems certain to make the move to 126 pounds later this year. Ball would already be in prime position to welcome the Japanese superstar to the featherweight division, but if he can better Inoue's win over Doheny, he will be difficult to avoid.

Ball wants the fight and – if and when it is made – it is one he will expect to win. He certainly won't treat it as a no-lose shot to nothing, secure in the knowledge that a large deposit will hit his bank account in the days after the fight.

"No, that's all a bonus," he said. "You've got to get in there and do the job, haven't you? I think they probably show him too much respect, and the people that have hurt him have probably thought, 'Whoa, I've hurt him there,' and they're shocked at themselves that they've hurt him.

"You're not getting no bigger than that, are you? He's the fighter that everyone's speaking about and calling him 'The Monster,' so it'd be good to get in there with him and show him who is a monster."

Stevenson obviously wants Ball to secure his financial future, but he also wants him to leave a permanent mark on the sport. He knows that taking on fighters like Inoue will see Ball accomplish both goals simultaneously.

"What a great matchup that'll be," Stevenson said. "A lot of people have, quite rightly, rated Inoue highly, but most of the people he's fought, knocked out and done well with, they've stood off and they've given respect – probably too much respect – and they've been knocked out themselves. Nick's never going to do that.

"Nick's got the best chance of smashing that kid out of any of the modern fighters around those weights. He does that, and he's right up on the pound-for-pound lists. It's serious. [Inoue would] be something we're definitely looking at for this year.

"We've got something special with Nick. He's a special sort of generational talent. He's exploded onto the scene, and what he's doing is great, next-level stuff. He's a proper world champion and done it the right way.

"That mindset he's got of taking on challenges, he's the man at the minute.

"Let them fear him. Let them worry about him. He brings so much more skill, ability and intelligence than people realize to the sport and to the game. Let them wake up worrying about him."

Listening to Stevenson's praise brings the hint of a smile to Ball's face, but there is absolutely no sense from either of them that they have accomplished their mission.

One day, Ball will look back and allow himself to be proud of what he has achieved. That day is still some way off.

"Probably when it's over," he said. "For now, just keep going, because I know how hard I've worked and how hard everyone around me has worked – so I'm going to work just as hard to keep it. Keep the top spot and never go back down to the bottom. Stay focused and keep working hard. That's the main thing." RING

## THE ROAD AHEAD

**Hall of Fame promoter Frank Warren has expertly guided Ball to the top of the featherweight division.**

**Warren kept Ball busy, matched him sensibly and positioned him for a mandatory shot at WBC beltholder Rey Vargas. Ball's performances have justified the support.**

**Matching Ball against respected world-level fighters like Ronny Rios and T.J. Doheny in his home city of Liverpool has allowed Ball to increase his fanbase and accrue invaluable experience. Assuming Ball gets past Doheny on March 15, Warren will happily turn him loose against the world's elite.**

**THE RING:** "Nick is a no-nonsense fighter who prefers to let his fighting speak for him. What were your first impressions of him?"

**FRANK WARREN:** "First time I met him, he was very quiet. He was very nice, not shy. He wasn't brash, but he was quite confident. His manager, Paul Stevenson, is a good bloke, and they're quite a close-knit bunch. I liked it. There was obviously a lot of respect between all of them.

"We got on OK and he's just been a joy to work with. Even with how it's all panned out now, he's still the same boy.

"It's a good combination. They've got a great camaraderie between all the fighters together as well. They all go and support each other. They're really a nice bunch, and I really love working with them."

**THE RING:** "Nick has a unique style. As well as being difficult for his opponents to solve, his aggressiveness also makes him exciting to watch. What makes him so good?"

**FW:** "He's got an engine on him which is unbelievable. You wouldn't want him on you. He's relentless once that bell goes. He'd get a great sponsorship out of Duracell batteries.

"He's relentless. He wears you down. But people don't realize that he's a good boxer as well. He slips and slides and he's got a great eye.

"I love him, I really do. He's a pleasure to watch and he should really be a unified champion at the moment."

**THE RING:** "Nick and his trainer, Paul Stevenson, are both keen on welcoming pound-for-pound superstar Naoya Inoue to the featherweight division. What are your thoughts on the fight?"

**FW:** "I'll tell you something: I like the fight. The fact that Inoue would be coming up, I think that'll even it all up. Yeah, I love the fight.

"Some people think, 'Oh, I've got a payday here.' That's a bad attitude. I've seen that with a lot of guys in a lot of fights. 'I'll just get the money, go there, and that's what it is' instead of thinking, 'I'm going to go and give everything I've got.'" RING

# FUTURE SHOCK

**THE MOUNTAIN OF SUPERLATIVES ALREADY ATTACHED TO MOSES ITAUMA HAS SOME WONDERING IF HE'S TOO GOOD TO BE TRUE, BUT THOSE CLOSEST TO THE HEAVYWEIGHT PHENOM PROMISE HE'LL LIVE UP TO THE HYPE**

**By Adam Smith**

Young phenom Moses Itauma obliterated Demsey McKean in one round.

Richard Pelham

Right on the ring apron, virtually touching the canvas and directly opposite Turki Alalshikh, was surely the most fortunate place to find myself for the hors d'oeuvre ahead of Oleksandr Usyk-Tyson Fury 2.

All eyes were laser-focused on the most precocious prodigy of the new wave of heavyweights who are fast filling Alalshikh's magic mixer.

Moses Itauma is the finest prospect in boxing. Period. Don't ask me. Just listen to every fighter who has felt his fast fists and struggled with his extraordinary judgment of distance. Fury, Daniel Dubois, Anthony Joshua – all serious admirers; rare to have so many rivals raving about enemy fire. Dangerous too if you are in Itauma's way.

Joe Joyce and Lawrence Okolie were also most impressed when they shared a ring with Moses – and that was when he was still at school.

As an amateur, Itauma never lost. He beat everyone put in front of him. 24 fights, 24 victories.

Many great boxers have of course had much deeper and largely undefeated amateur records – Vasiliy Lomachenko, with his purported 396 wins and one solitary loss, springs to mind. Obviously beyond real comprehension.

Moses never went too far and wide, but multiple medals were achieved before he turned down an Olympic spot to

start earning for the family he adores.

So a week before his 20th birthday, the Slovakian-born Brit starred on another enormous Riyadh Season show, standing undefeated in 10 pro fights.

The latest test came in the shape of "The Tower," Demsey McKean, who had extended world-class Filip Hrgovic into the 12th and had trained incredibly hard for this alongside Ring/IBF cruiserweight champ Jai Opetaia.

I took to the DAZN mic and felt the vibrations from Itauma's gliding heavyweight feet as the sweet southpaw jab and crisp left hand went to work.

"This is the 11th professional outing for the sizzling southpaw Moses Itauma as he looks to catapult himself to the higher echelons of the heavyweight division in double-quick time" – my opening lines.

I wouldn't need many.

"Ridiculous talent – the variation, the spite, the know-how, always setting traps … razor-sharp hands," adds "Dazzling" Darren Barker.

"And the angles," chips in the brilliant analyst Barry Jones. "How he dips his shoulders, punches upwards, a shovel shot, screw shot …"

All three of us are struck by his clever movement, ring awareness, the way he uses the jab to the body, and then …

"OHHHH!" we collectively gasp.

Seconds later, another …

"OHHHH!"

McKean is floored twice, clinically dispatched amid an eerie, immediate whip of conclusion. The poor Australian could not fathom what had unfolded.

"Itauma wins in one … Demsey McKean is blown away, and maybe [Itauma] could become the youngest heavyweight champion in history," I bellowed.

Echoes of when "Iron" Mike Tyson burst onto the scene, destroying all in his wake. That brutality, excitement – I remember so vividly as a kid thrilled by such heavyweight power.

Tyson, of course, holds the record for becoming the youngest-ever world heavyweight champion, and Moses only has until May if he is to break that. In November 1986, Tyson knocked Trevor Berbick all around the ring and then out to announce a new era in boxing – but that was in his 28th fight.

Itauma is 6-foot-2 and his fighting weight is between 240 and 250 pounds.

Richard Pelham

Moses Itauma was only in his 11th when he simply stole the Saudi show. Shockwaves were felt around the ring. And weeks later, The Ring rewarded the young heavyweight by rightfully naming him the 2024 Prospect of the Year at a magical gala dinner in London.

Moses looked cool as a cat, gliding through the legends in the spectacular Painted Hall at the Old Royal Naval College, and he was, as ever, full of humility, modesty and charm.

"I'm in a room with all the greatest fighters around the world, all the people I grew up watching – I guess I hope to emulate what all you guys are doing in the near future – obviously I am only 20 years old. My future's bright, and hopefully you get to see my face a lot more."

Keeping it short but meaningful, he sauntered offstage, saying, "That's enough from me!"

Beautiful like his ring movement.

Every time I bump into Moses – interview him, chat with him – I am really impressed.

Elite trainer Ben Davison, who has of course guided Fury and AJ, told me it's Moses' "emotional maturity" that sets him apart.

"It's unbelievable for a fighter of his age … His love for the sport, his hard work, incredible raw talent – he's so enjoyable to train," offered Davison. "The coordination, the skill level of a smaller-weight fighter. He's such a coachable athlete, and it is that emotional maturity he has – astonishing!"

I love the sporting "genius" with that X-factor.

At just 17, legendary snooker player Ronnie O'Sullivan won his first ranking event and still somehow remains as sparkling as ever on the green baize.

Pro soccer player Jude Bellingham played for Birmingham City at 16, and look at him now. Michael Owen was just 18 when he scored his wonder goal against Argentina in the 1998 World Cup.

Moses, like his promoter, Frank Warren, supports Arsenal. Myles Lewis-Skelly is breaking through this season at just 18, while Ethan Nwaneri is only 17.

Carlos Alcaraz was breathtaking as he became the youngest to top the world singles tennis rankings at 19, and Luke Littler has blown up darts even more than it had already been blown up by capturing the PDC World Darts Championship at 17! Littler annihilated Michael van Gerwen's previous record by seven years.

Old enough? Outrageously good enough!

In just over two years, the Itauma rise has been equally compelling.

Blessed with a superb ring IQ and guided expertly, Moses turned pro in January 2023 at Wembley with a first-round KO of Marcel Bode. Six more educational fights followed that year, and four in his breakthrough 2024. Nine of his 11 wins have now come super-fast – and all within a total of just 23 rounds.

With so many on the outside raving about this boxing phenomenon, I was to have a bizarre Itauma occurrence "inside" – on the Isle of Sheppey.

As I drove down to the deepest, darkest corner of South East England on a bleak midwinter's afternoon – past where my childhood hero Barry McGuigan and his talented boxing family reside – the words of Francis Warren, son of Frank, blasted through my car speaker.

"Moses Itauma is the next Tiger Woods, Lionel Messi – I think he'll have reach like Serena Williams. He's going to be a monster of sport," predicted Itauma's manager.

"Moses is a blue-chip fighter who stands out – he's so mature, understands the business, does not stop working. Training comes first. It's not just what he's capable of doing inside the ring, but what he does outside it."

"Moses Itauma is the next Tiger Woods, Lionel Messi – I think he'll have reach like Serena Williams. He's going to be a monster of sport."

Crossing the bridge onto the Kent island – famous for its many shipwrecks – my daughter Jessamy and I headed for one of the three remote Sheppey prisons. She studies criminology and we had managed to secure a visit to HMP Elmley.

Then a sweet, serendipitous moment.

Keys, phones and possessions in the locker, guards escorting us into the bowels of "Elmley" – but little did I know a "Bowler" was about to come into the Itauma story.

After a few minutes, I was waved over to the prison cafe. Tucked away sorting the teas was an enthusiastic man who said, "Adam, Adam – let's talk boxing. Let's talk Moses Itauma."

I mean, I am writing a feature for The Ring on this very fighter!

I was introduced to Matt Bowler, who told me he was a boxing coach who had known Moses for years. Jessamy hoped he was an inmate – I wasn't quite sure – and didn't really care!

Because he knew Moses and he knew him well!

The only thing I was allowed to write on was a ripped piece of cardboard, but I needed more on Moses.

"I first saw him at 8 or 9," Matt began.

"He's the best I have ever seen. There is no one like him. I boxed as an amateur, but when the Itaumas came into our gym … wow!

"Karol, his older brother, won gold at the Youth Olympics and is a good prospect now, but Riko was just different at St. Mary's ABC.

"Did you know that when Riko won his European gold – he knocked every opponent out in the first round!"

I wondered why some call him Moses while others – like Ben and Barry Smith – refer to him as Enriko or Riko.

For promotional reasons, his middle name of Moses was chosen to lead. Karol agreed that Moses was a strong name for a heavyweight. Moses told me he just doesn't care. Enriko Itauma became Moses Itauma to us. His inner circle calls him what they like.

"He just won a host of tournaments – schools, Juniors, Youth Europeans and the Heavyweight Youth Gold," Matt continued.

"Riko did school, played football (soccer), but the ring was his home."

Matt's face then lit up from behind the small prison coffee counter.

"Riko still lives in Chatham – he is such a family man. It's so good to see and so exciting. I know I am biased, but honestly, he is going to be a massive superstar. I have been saying it from day one. He's inspired all the new Kent kids at St. Mary's and Ropes and Glory. Riko works so hard – he is not going to be stopped. Heavyweight champion this year, mark my words, and you watch him go!"

Even inside the prisons, they are talking about him.

"They absolutely love Moses in here," Matt said.

"That fellow over there, Callum who works in here, Damien who cooks the prison food – he even made an [antenna] out of a tin can to get some reception to tune into the last fight!"

It was amazing to hear how much Moses is admired on the inside as well as the outside – and how far and wide the love stretches.

There's a huge fan club in the Slovakian town of Kezmarok. Moses was born in a fishing village on the fast-flowing Poprad River and often returns, but his Slovakian mum Martina and his Nigerian dad Charles brought the family to Britain seeking a better life for their children.

The family stability was rooted early, and this has very much been the building blocks around Moses. Karol – a fellow professional – and another older brother, Charles, help with the "Itauma business." Add the training trio of Davison, Lee Wylie and Barry Smith with the golden promoters of heavyweights – the Warrens – and it is some team assembled.

Matt's words were ringing in my ears for days, but with Elmley and Chatham in the rearview mirror, I was keen to reach the main man.

Getting Moses out of the gym was a fight in itself. Francis, Ben – someone get me Moses on the phone!

"He's still on the heavy bag," Barry Smith shouted, "Maybe 20 minutes, actually an hour – you can't stop him, mate!"

"Sorry, Adam, but I just love the gym," Moses eventually told me.

He's got this lovely manner – intense, ambitious but calm, calculated and so respectful.

"I'm in the gym now because I am bored," Moses said. "As soon as I get the call to fight, we kick-start, but if I am not in a gym, even on holiday, I feel very insecure. I feel out of place."

Johnny Nelson (my former Sky Sports colleague and long-reigning WBO cruiserweight titleholder) always did this. Wherever we went. It was and still is his anchor.

"My favorite is the pads, my least is out running – but I have to do that two or three times a week," Moses explained.

I enjoy our chats. I think everyone does with Moses. He is intelligent, chill and knows where he is heading. There just isn't that nasty, arrogant tone.

"I loved watching Naseem Hamed and Floyd Mayweather. They paved the way. I am not trying to emulate them, just take pieces ... follow in their footsteps."

"I'm only thinking about the sport of boxing, Adam. I am not bothered with all this global superstar stuff.

"Leave me to do the fighting."

Moses is very much his own man.

"I loved watching Naseem Hamed and Floyd Mayweather. They paved the way. I am not trying to emulate them, just take pieces ... follow in their footsteps," he told me.

I wanted to know when the penny really dropped.

"I first realized when I was tipped in to spar Lawrence Okolie at just 15 and I found it incredibly comfortable. That led to AJ, Dubois – Fury recently – and I have been asked to go to Usyk's camp too."

I love his intent and told him that spending time in Gandia at Usyk's HQ was mind-blowing, even for a seasoned broadcaster.

Surely it would be invaluable.

The big question: When do you want to actually fight him?

"One hundred percent, I would have Usyk next," Moses told me.

Direct, honest, surprising, brilliant!

He seems less concerned with breaking the Tyson record and more about fighting the very best. Surely further experience is needed.

"Rounds come in sparring, don't worry. I am used to being under the lights now, on the big stage, and I'll do the rounds easy. Hopefully I get a title shot by the end of the year."

"What sets you apart, Moses?" I asked.

"No idea! Everything put together. You need talent and hard work. Must be comfortable in a fight despite crowd opinions.

"One thousand may want you to win, some hear the 10 who want you to lose – you must be able to handle that. Mentality, courage and the will to win. Mainly I think it's being able to make the adjustments inside a fight. That's the magic."

"And the power ..." I added. "Ben says you are just unbelievably strong."

"He's talking rubbish," Moses smirked.

"AJ and Fabio hit harder. Mind you, I haven't been hit by myself!"

That made me laugh. A lot.

"I'm just trying to enjoy it, Adam – I have a great team; my family will always humble me if I need to be."

Humility is already there in droves. Mixed with a vicious ring intent and that delicious quiet, measured ambition. This looks to be the potent recipe for a heavyweight who has the advantage of being fast, a southpaw, clever and unpredictable.

"It was the angles," vastly experienced former world title challenger Mariusz Wach told me a few weeks after he was taken out in two by Itauma last summer at the O2 in London.

"The speed, the surprise – I couldn't see or read the punches."

Another accolade, from a 49-fight warhorse who once upon a time went the distance with Wladimir Klitschko.

Richard Pelham

**Itauma stopped Ilja Mezencev on the Usyk-Fury undercard last May.**

"Mature too," concluded Wach.

Back to Ben's highlight of "emotional maturity."

"It's how he conducts himself," Ben continues.

"AJ had that, and [Itauma] has seen it in the gym. He has the capability of beating anyone and becoming one of the greatest ever. But it's all about longevity."

"The first time I saw him was [when he was] 14," Francis Warren adds.

"His footwork and head movement were unreal. There's also been great family support around him; everyone believes in him, but his feet are firmly on the ground. Usually someone goes out there and says something negative, but no one has. He loves to travel, he's a well-mannered man, and it is about taking the right opportunities and not rushing him. Ability point of view, yes, but from an experience point of view, we're not quite there yet. We've all got a job to do here."

"Where will you be at 35?" I ask Moses.

"I honestly don't know. I live day to day. I train hard. I want to prove myself. I believe I am aware of what I could be capable of."

I loved that line, and I told him. I said I'm about to see Frank; do you have a message for him?

"Let's slice things up. Tell Frank I want Usyk next. And if it happens, I'll say thank you, Adam!"

I'm not sure I have quite as much sway as Frank – but I walked into our meeting and told him.

"Ha ha ha," said Warren Sr.

"Isn't he great? I love his attitude. By the end of the year, he'll be a world champion. It's not a sprint; it's a marathon. It's one thing becoming world champion, but then you have to sustain it. Mike Tyson got there and threw it all away. [Itauma has] the best team behind him – let me do my job!"

So far, so good for Moses Itauma – the 6-foot-2½ southpaw who may just be the next best thing.

Yes, he needs to prove his durability and step up to a higher level within the crowded heavyweight landscape – but look at the speed at which he's cut through.

Once in a generation, something special happens in sport. Virtually everyone with a respected voice is excited about him.

35 fights. 35 wins. 24 as an amateur, 11 as a pro.

I go back to Matt Bowler:

"I don't think he'll ever lose. I'm not just saying that because he's from our club. I have never seen anyone like him. He'll never, ever get beat," he declared.

"Matt's not the one fighting," laughs Moses.

"But it will be nice if that happens."

Matt Bowler and the lads at HMP Elmley will be cheering loudly all the way.

Moses Itauma has the world at his dancing feet.

Inside and outside of his beloved squared circle. RING

# NO MORE WORDS

**LAUREN PRICE** AND **NATASHA JONAS** HAD PLENTY TO SAY TO EACH OTHER IN THE LEAD-UP TO THEIR CROSSROADS UNIFICATION IN MARCH, BUT THIS CLASSIC IS ALL ABOUT ACTION

**By Diego Morilla**

Natasha Jonas (left) and Lauren Price will clash at London's famed Royal Albert Hall.

Richard Pelham

If body language and wardrobe choices are to be taken as clear signs of a fighter's state of mind, then we can be sure we'll soon be watching a classic.

Everything about their walk up to the dais and their brief, silent staredown confirms the general notion that Ring Magazine welterweight champion Lauren Price and her challenger, Natasha Jonas, are on course to give us one of the best 147-pound title fights in the history of women's boxing.

Relaxed yet confident, wearing a long, heavy jacket and formal attire, Price approached the stage with an exceedingly businesslike seriousness during their January 21 press conference in London. On the other end, Jonas was already in combat mode, dressed in a tracksuit that she could have worn to a training

session right after the event. Their personalities couldn't be more evident. And since not a word was spoken as they stood face-to-face for about 30 awkward seconds, it was a tight-lipped and menacing Price looking down on a cocky smirk from Jonas that gave the first read into their states of mind.

Words, however, had been flowing from both of them since the fight was announced to take place on March 7 at London's Royal Albert Hall, and they were soon flowing again.

"The underdog [label] suits me. I've been here before," said Jonas. "The pressure is not on me. Lauren is the champion who never lost a round and the Olympic gold medalist. There's a lot of pressure on her to come and do what she says she can do."

Not getting a gold medal in the Olympics was never an issue for Jonas until Price picked up on it and turned it into a talking point. Jonas then lost no time in pulling an aikido move to put the pressure back on her Welsh foe, who can hardly give an interview without mentioning her gold-medal, no-rounds-lost-so-far combo as the centerpiece of her short but stacked resume. The clash of egos that brought them to this juncture is heavily scripted with these personal and professional differences.

The 10-year difference in age has also been a recurring line in that script. And as it's already her custom, the 40-year-old Jonas is the one who flipped it against Price, who is 30.

Their records (16-2-1, 9 KOs for Jonas, 8-0, 2 KOs for Price) also display an 11-fight gap that qualifies Jonas as the more experienced pro in a fight that will be all about ring IQ and pace control.

The equation in any other situation would make Jonas the slight favorite. But boxing is about performance and its many subtleties, and that's where Price has earned her advantage. In her young and meteoric career, she has managed to look better and stronger than Jonas, ending with her May 2024 win over former pound-for pound entrant Jessica McCaskill. It's not unthinkable to believe that Price could earn a spot in the pound-for-pound ratings herself, should she win this bout, and all within less than 10 fights to her credit.

**THE UNDERDOG LABEL SUITS ME. I'VE BEEN HERE BEFORE.**

But Jonas is no stranger to the role of champion-as-underdog. She was still on the comeback trail after her two most important setbacks (against Katie Taylor in a razor-thin decision with the Ring lightweight belt on the line in 2021, and a previous draw with Terri Harper in a junior lightweight bout back in 2020), making Mikaela Mayer the slight favorite against her in their IBF welterweight clash in January 2024. Yet Jonas still managed to score the upset by split decision (in her hometown of Liverpool).

Young, unbeaten guns might not fully understand the value of tasting defeat, and Jonas has that edge as well. Price may have overstepped when she cited those losses along with Jonas' age to awkwardly call for her

Peter Byrne

**Jonas won a controversial decision over U.S. star Mikaela Mayer.**

Jan Kruger

**Price was punch-perfect against Bexcy Mateus last time out.**

retirement during the presser.

"I decide when it's time [to retire], so be careful what you wish for," said Jonas before declaring that she'll be the first opponent to not only win a round against Price but add an "L" to her pro resume.

"I love being the first. The first is something no one can take away," Jonas said in a tongue-in-cheek reference to her role as the first-ever female boxer representing Great Britain to participate in the Olympic Games, an achievement reflected in the "Miss GB" moniker of her early days.

Both will be adding a "first" to their resumes, however. On March 7, they will become the first women to headline a boxing event at the Royal Albert Hall, an achievement that is set to air on the eve of International Women's Day. And it all began to take shape when they shared the spotlight with two separate bouts on a December card (Jonas unifying the IBF and WBC belts against Ivana Habazin and Price defending the Ring and WBA belts against Bexcy Mateus), followed by a brief joint appearance in the ring, where the first few choice words were exchanged between the colorful pair.

**COMING INTO THIS, WE BOTH KNEW WHAT WAS ON THE LINE.**

Headlining in a homecoming bout, Jonas was just in the middle of telling her fans how special her next Christmas was going to be when a loud choir of screams and a few boos stole her thunder as Price popped up back in the arena from the dressing room. The awkward impromptu presser took no one by surprise – the card was called "Collision Course" for a reason.

"Coming into this, we both knew what was on the line," said Price. "Let's make a great fight in 2025, have a great camp, and I'll see you soon." It was only then that Jonas replied for the first time with a phrase she'd turn into her mantra for the entire buildup of the fight.

"Beware of what you ask for," said Jonas. The cringy but hilarious back-and-forth that followed was a harbinger of things to come, with both clinging to their own lines and never retreating.

Whatever transpires in the ring at the majestic venue in March, Price's own refrain of having gold-medaled at the Olympics and never losing a round is definitely going to be challenged.

"There's always younger people who want to take your spot and your place, but you have to put them in their place," Jonas told Sky Sports.

Price, even at the risk of repeating herself once too often, guaranteed her foe that she remains very much focused on the prize.

"I've always had pressure on me from the amateur days," she said at the press conference. "Going to the Olympics, expecting to win gold, it doesn't get much bigger than that. But with pressure comes diamonds. I will be coming out on March 7 and taking those belts back to Wales." RING

Robinson alongside acclaimed coach George Gainford. Opposite page: Pep flanked by manager Lou Viscusi and trainer Bill Gore.

# FEEDSTORE

# FOLKLORE

LONG BEFORE ESTABLISHING THEMSELVES AS TWO OF THE BEST BOXERS OF ALL TIME, **WILLIE PEP** AND **SUGAR RAY ROBINSON** MET IN AN INCONSPICUOUS AMATEUR BOUT NOW STEEPED IN LEGEND

**by Don Stradley**

Robinson: Al Fenn; Pep: Bettmann

In those uncertain years between the Great Depression and World War II, the city of Norwich, Connecticut, was a hotbed for amateur boxing. The city showcased such regional favorites as Pepper Martin, Frenchy Dauzat and perhaps the most revered of all, Spider Hewitt, the All-Navy welterweight champion stationed at the submarine base in nearby New London. Summertime in Norwich meant amateur fights at the Elks fairground, where boxing was featured alongside anything from fireworks to musical acts to a rodeo. Norwich hosted so many amateur bouts that on December 2, 1938, the locals barely noticed an intriguing matchup between a 17-year-old New Yorker and a 16-year-old from Hartford. In more specific terms, that was the day Sugar Ray Robinson fought Willie Pep.

Robinson hadn't quite achieved the form that would, two years later, earn him praise from the New York Daily News as "pound for pound, the best amateur fighting man in America." At 17, he was all Adam's apple and elbows. Yet he outpointed Pep, giving him a rare amateur loss. The three-round contest, however, remains a shadowy thing. It is doubtful that anyone who witnessed it is still living. This, of course, makes it even more legendary.

**"I FOUGHT HIM IN THE ATTIC OF A BIG SHED IN NORWICH. MY MANAGER WAS A BUM, AND IT WAS THE GREATEST MISMATCH OF MY CAREER."**

The meeting of two future titans took place in a converted warehouse on North Main Street that had once served as a car barn for the New Haven railroad. Refurbished in 1935, the building's first level became the Checkerboard Feed Company. The Duwell Athletic Club took over the upstairs space and ran amateur bouts every other Friday, with occasional pro bouts mixed in. Some recalled the venue as barely able to hold a boxing ring, though it was also said to fit upwards of 1,000 people. General admission was 75 cents. Reserved seats cost one dollar. Kids got in for 25 cents, and ladies paid nothing if they were "accompanied by an escort." These amateur affairs were sometimes bolstered by major stars who served as guest referees, including "Cinderella Man" Jim Braddock. On warm nights, the unventilated arena combined with odors from the feedstore to create a unique aroma, but not even that discouraged the city's loyal fans of amateur fighting.

Robinson and Pep were part of a typical Norwich program pitting amateurs from Connecticut against a New York team. Robinson was from the Salem Crescent Athletic Club of Harlem and had fought in Connecticut a few times before as "Ray Roberts." Connecticut was unusual in that amateurs fought for prize money, the winner getting anywhere from three dollars to 20, depending on the memory of those telling the tale. Young boxers from out of state used aliases, protecting their amateur status while they tried to win cash. The Salem Crescent boxers were an impressive bunch – they were especially known for being great jabbers – but Connecticut fans made more fuss over someone like Spider Hewitt, whose appearances were sometimes announced in bold headlines usually saved for Wall Street disasters and Nazi invasions. To Norwich fans in 1938, Robinson was just another skinny kid from New York.

Bill Pedace, the Duwell ring announcer, recalled the three-round fight in 1985 for The New York Times. Tasked with finding an opponent for Pep, he'd called Robinson's trainer, George Gainford: "George said, 'I got a boy who could beat him. Do you care if he gets beat?' I didn't care, so he brought up this kid who fought that night, as I remember, under the name of Ray Roberts."

Lost in the fight's mythology is that Robinson was apparently a last-minute replacement. In newspaper advertisements for the show, Pep was scheduled to meet Danny Edwards, a New York bantamweight who had fought on a few Norwich programs. There's no mention of Robinson or "Roberts."

Pep usually laughed about the night he faced Robinson. "I shouldn't have been in the ring with him," he told the Hartford Courant in 1999, noting that Robinson was taller and more experienced. In 2002, Pep told the New London Day, "I fought him in the attic of a big shed in Norwich. My manager was a bum, and it was the greatest mismatch of my career." Pep added that Robinson "almost killed me." In his heavily ghostwritten 1974 memoir, Friday's Heroes, Pep wrote that Robinson was "all over me. He's too good. Too big. He's punching me and punching me and I'm just trying to hang in there." On another occasion, Pep claimed Robinson knocked him down early. "I got off the floor and ran like a thief until the last bell sounded," Pep said.

Yet Pedace, supposedly an eyewitness, went on record saying Robinson was cautious against Pep. Pedace recalled, "After the first round, George yelled up at him, 'Stop fooling around. Get in there and fight.' Ray won a decision."

Who do we believe? Pep saying Robinson "almost killed me" or Pedace, who described Robinson as cautious? Robinson's own recollection, taken from his autobiography, was that the fight was "a close one."

A glimmer of what really happened comes from a brief report that appeared in the next day's Norwich Bulletin. The coverage claimed Pep hurt "Roberts" in the first round, but that the New Yorker settled down to give "as sweet a boxing exhibition as has ever been seen here." By the end, the fight dissolved into "a bicycle race with Pep peddling for all he was worth." The visitor even tried to land a bolo punch but missed. (Even at 16, no one was going to hit Willie Pep with a bolo punch, though a teenage Robinson was cheeky enough to try.)

**Pep dukes it out with Raymond Famechon at Madison Square Garden.**

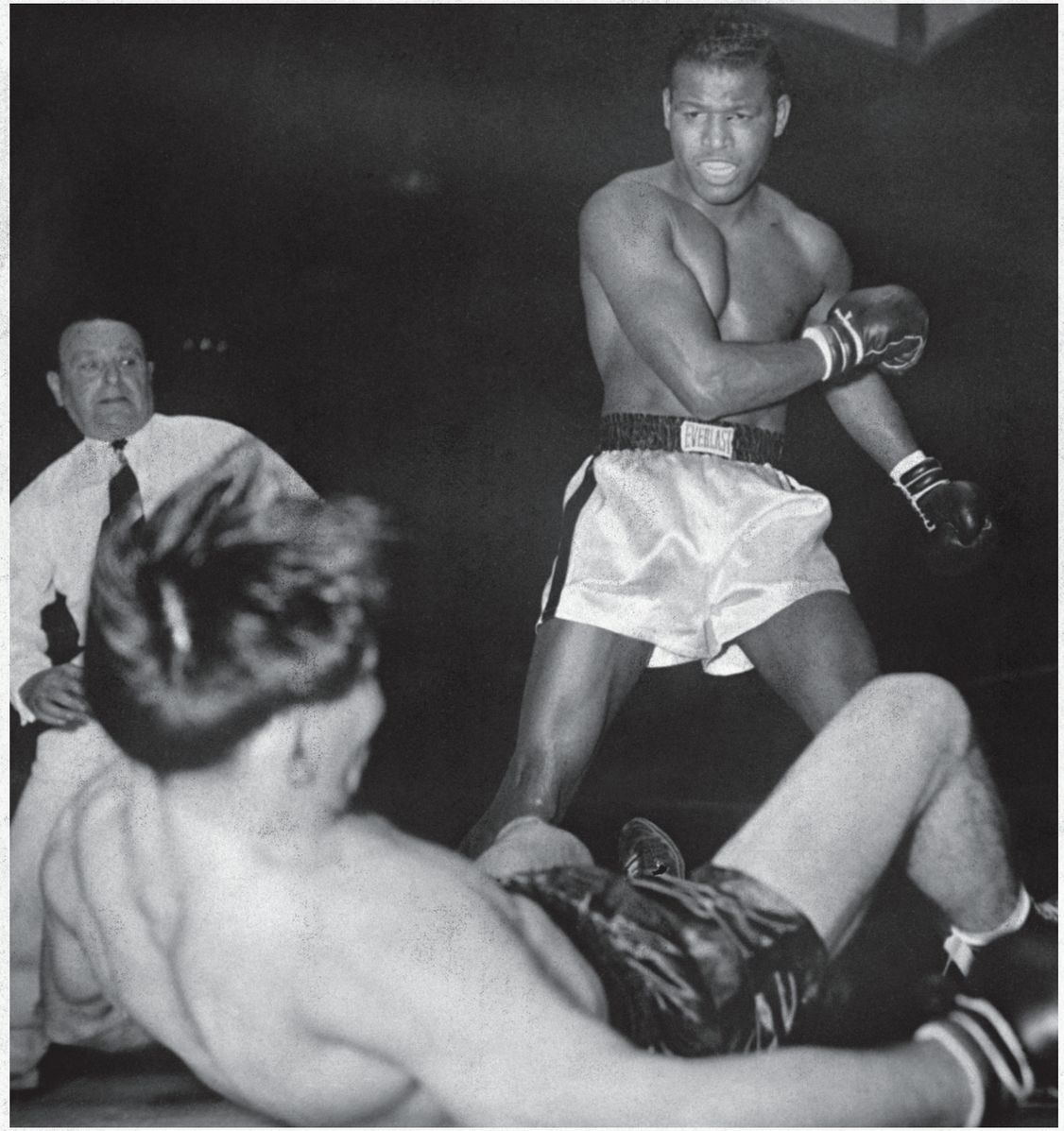
While details of the fight are scarce, the legends it spawned are plentiful. One involved Robinson arriving in Connecticut like some sort of mystery man, his identity a secret. However, Robinson fought in Norwich just two weeks earlier, winning a decision over Al Brouillard. Prior to that, he'd fought in Thompsonville, losing to a Massachusetts fighter named Charles Baginski and drawing with Baginski in a rematch. Robinson was hardly a mystery figure, even if he used a false name. Still, future journalists would romanticize the story, telling it as if

Robinson sauntered into Norwich like a pool hustler, looking to fleece the rubes. Judging by his struggles with Baginski, the 17-year-old Robinson was not vastly superior to other good amateurs. He was talented, but he had to fight hard against these New Englanders.

Conversely, some Robinson biographers have upheld a myth that he was a raw beginner, yet so full of natural talent that he whipped the more experienced Pep. This is also false. In fact, Robinson was already a Golden Gloves winner and had roughly the same amount of experience as Pep.

The bout's greatest legend concerns the aftermath, when an angry Norwich crowd supposedly accused Robinson of being a ringer, a pro from New York. Gainford told the Associated Press in 1952, "The fans raised a riot after the fight. They were sure Ray was a pro, and they hauled us off to the jail. We were lucky to get out of there alive."

**In his European debut, Robinson battered Jean Stock in Paris.**



PA Images Archive

Robinson offered a less dramatic version of events in his autobiography, Sugar Ray, ghostwritten by Dave Anderson. Robinson described getting dressed after the fight when a policeman and a state boxing official approached him with questions. Within seconds, Robinson and Gainford were taken away and locked up.

Robinson and Gainford told the story a few times over the years. Though the gist was that Robinson spent a night in jail waiting for his amateur status to be verified, they never told it the same way twice. Biographers liked the story, though, and regurgitated it often. Still, it sounds dodgy.

In fight-frenzied eastern Connecticut, a "riot" and the jailing of a fighter would've been news. Yet there was not one line of newspaper coverage. Besides, the Duwell organizers had a longstanding relationship with the Harlem club and had booked Robinson just two weeks earlier. The claim that fans rioted, or that police stepped in, is hard to fathom.

Even Pep called Robinson a liar. In the 1970s, Pep explained to author W.C. Heinz that Robinson's story was bogus.

"I was a nobody then," Pep said. "So why would they throw him in jail for beatin' me?"

**"I WAS A NOBODY THEN. SO WHY WOULD THEY THROW HIM IN JAIL FOR BEATIN' ME?"**

But Pep lied, too. In his portrayal of the fight as an unwinnable farce, Pep always noted Robinson's weight advantage. As far back as a 1943 Esquire profile on Pep, Robinson is said to have outweighed Pep by nine pounds. As he retold the story over the years, Pep increased the poundage. By 2002, Pep told the Courant, "I think I weighed in at 105 or 115, and he was at 140."

Unfortunately for Pep, the results printed after the fight list "Ray Roberts" at 123 and Pep at 122. Pep may have remembered himself as a flyweight, but old reports show he was already fighting at 120 or more. Robinson, meanwhile, would still be competing in the 126-pound class for the next several months. Maybe Pep was only joking about the weight difference, or maybe Robinson seemed heavier to him, but the difference in weight was untrue.

Pep also convinced a lot of reporters that this was his only loss as an amateur. That's also false, but Pep was likable, and people believed him.

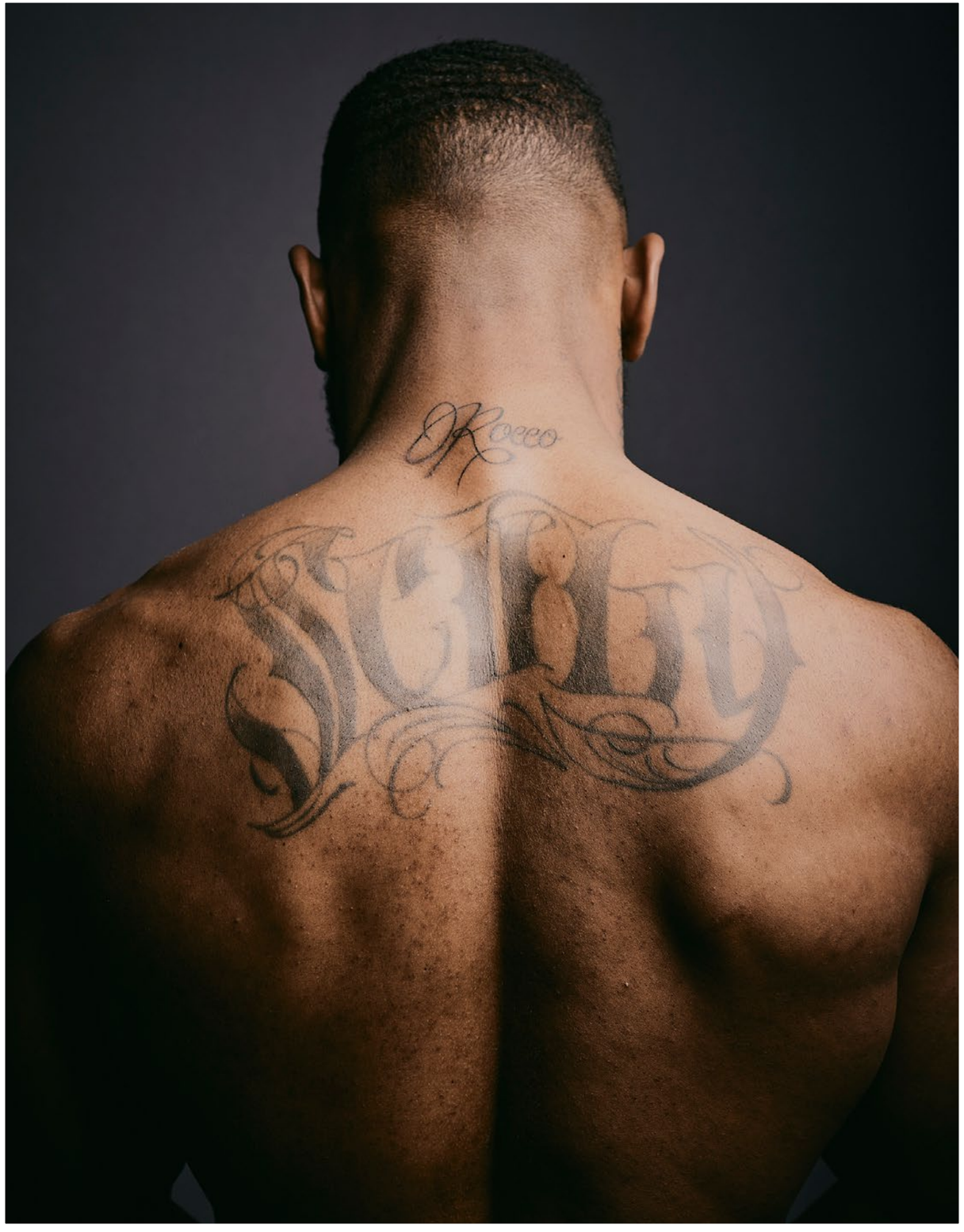
Robinson and Pep were pound-for-pound greats. But were they also pound-for-pound bullshitters? Whatever the truth, each wanted the fight remembered as a disaster. It is very likely that both were being deceptive. Yet in the context of each man's career, there may have been a reason for them to lie.

During the 1940s and early '50s, when Robinson and Pep were at their zenith, a small but persistent segment of boxing fans and insiders argued Pep was the greater fighter. Could it be that Robinson and Gainford concocted their story to quiet Pep's fans? Robinson always praised Pep's skill, but was his claim of beating him so soundly that he landed in jail a rebuttal to those who dared to rate Pep higher? And was Pep's story of being grossly outweighed a way to disregard the bout's importance and, in effect, disregard Robinson? And did each party repeat their stories so often that they started to believe them?

The irony of this legendary matchup is that apparently it made no impression on the people who were there. Aside from a couple of lines in the Norwich Bulletin, firsthand accounts were practically nonexistent. Of course, Norwich hosted more than 300 amateur bouts that year, so it is no surprise that Pep and Robinson failed to stick in anyone's memory. What's more, the fight was on the undercard. Customers may have been filing in, not yet seated. Pep was not a Norwich regular. He fought out of Hartford, 40 miles away, and rarely fought in the Duwell arena. The Norwich customers were probably not racing to see him. It is possible that Pep and Robinson fought in front of a lot of empty seats.

Years later in 1965, on a special Christmas boxing show at Boston Garden, Robinson and Pep fought an exhibition of four abbreviated rounds. Now in their 40s, they met for a lark and a purported $1,000 apiece. The Globe called the event "more burlesque than fight." Strangely, in all of the press they did before the bout, neither mentioned their initial meeting above the feedstore. For many years, even in Connecticut, the fight was an unsubstantiated rumor.

It could be that Robinson and Pep's 1938 encounter wasn't as great as we'd imagine. We like to envision Pep darting around, quick as a hummingbird, and Robinson throwing his perfect combinations. But they were teenagers, and it was an early piece of work. In the years to come, when veteran sportswriters recalled the glory days of Norwich boxing, it wasn't Pep and Robinson they remembered. It was the venue; it was the hubbub on North Main; it was running up the stairs to catch a glimpse of Snooks Lacy or Unknown Morgan, the gallant local figures. Even when Robinson returned to Norwich as a major star in 1941, invited to referee an amateur show, the fanfare was minimal. A much bigger story was that Spider Hewitt had quit boxing and was returning to the U.S. Navy. The war was coming, Robinson and Pep had turned pro, but the headlines still belonged to Spider. RING





# Kurt Scoby and the Hardest Thing to Do in Boxing

Photographs by Wojtek Urbanek • Text by Thomas Hauser

Kurt Scoby is a 29-year-old junior welterweight. One year ago, he was rolling along with a 13-0 (11 KOs) ring record and a successful ShoBox appearance (TKO 2 over John Mannu) on his resume. Then he fought Toughman alumnus Dakota Linger in Atlanta.

Linger (a policeman from Buckhannon, West Virginia) was a 30-to-1 underdog. He came into the fight with a 13-6-3 record and had won only two of his previous eight outings. But one of those wins was a second-round shock upset of prospect Josue Vargas in The Theatre at Madison Square Garden.

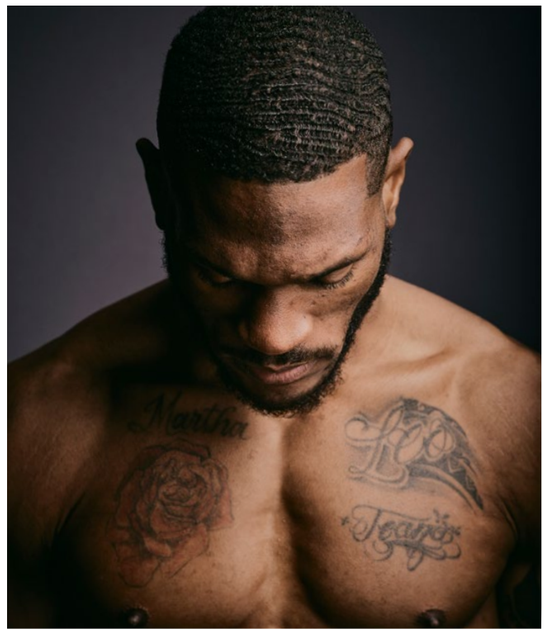
"If Dakota took boxing lessons," one scribe noted after Linger-Vargas, "he might be good."

Scoby controlled the early going against Linger. But unlike past opponents, Dakota didn't crumble when Kurt hit him. Then Linger started landing hard right hands of his own. And he beat Scoby down. The referee called a halt to the action at the 2:21 mark of Round 6. There was no objection from the losing corner. Kurt is on the comeback trail now. But the mountain toward a world title fight just got higher to climb.

"I know what happened that night," Scoby says of his loss to Linger. "In boxing, you can never sleep on an opponent. In a way, you have to be humble. I wasn't as focused as I should have been, and I paid the price. But I'm dealing with it and coming back stronger."

Scoby would like a rematch against the man who beat him. Great fighters come back from knockout losses. Joe Louis, Lennox Lewis, Wladimir Klitschko and Roberto Duran are among the many warriors who stand testament to that.

But one should consider the words of Sugar Ray Robinson, who cautioned, "The hardest thing for a fighter to do is to come back and beat a man who has beaten him badly." RING



© Wojtek Urbanek

# Another One Bites The Dust

By Lee Groves

**Top Rank's exit from ESPN is another blow for U.S. boxing.**

A Federal Express driver just stopped by the house to drop off a package for me. It contained the latest issue of Ring Magazine, which I receive as a contributing freelancer. When I told the driver, who was close to my age of 60, that I wrote for the magazine, he said, with a touch of wistfulness, "Oh yes, I remember watching the fights with my dad on ABC, NBC and CBS. Boy, boxing used to be big, but I don't see it anymore."

This is something I hear often from people in my age group who remember what it was like when boxing was a sport of high prominence. Unfortunately, boxing in the U.S. took another depressing step toward its eventual extinction as a viable sport.

In February, it was announced that Top Rank might no longer have its fights aired on ESPN, meaning that as of August, "the sweet science" will no longer be available on linear television in the U.S. It was probably the worst-kept secret in the industry, but the news still struck with the impact of a Joe Frazier hook.

Yes, boxing is thriving globally; I see the enthusiastic crowds in the U.K., and it is doing well in Mexico, Puerto Rico, Central and South America, Australia and in the Pacific Rim. But in the U.S., boxing has fallen off the cliff, and I believe it is the result of a decades-long erosion not prompted by unpopularity or bad ratings, but by decisions made by network executives and other power brokers, the changing of the market in terms of purse demands and the sport's unique ability to engage in self-immolation (bad decisions, bad behavior, bad marketing, missed opportunities to foster potential mainstream stars, etc.).

We have all heard the phrase "death by a thousand cuts." For boxing, I believe today's situation in the U.S. can be boiled down to this phrase: "death by a thousand decisions." Willful decisions that have resulted in boxing's audience contracting instead of expanding. Willful decisions infected by short-term thinking and profit motive rather than driven by a desire to fix problems and right the ship. "I'll get mine now, and to heck with the other guy."

The infrastructure that had reliably churned out stars has been gutted. The American amateur boxing system is in tatters; TV and media exposure of pre-Olympic dual meets that introduced potential Olympians to the general public no longer exist. The process by which Olympic teams are selected has become extremely complicated and impossible to follow. Although the Olympic Games are shown globally, the boxing competition is not on marquee platforms in the U.S. In fact, there are doubts as to whether boxing will even continue to *be* an Olympic sport, and that's because of the corruption that has infected the sport for decades. It didn't begin with Roy Jones Jr. vs. Park Si Hun in the 1988 Seoul Olympics, but the stench of that decision moved NBC to remove boxing from prime time and onto the "Red Channel" on the 1992 NBC "Triple-Cast," then to 3 a.m. on CNBC in future games.

Because of this "out of sight, out of mind" reality, kids who might have been persuaded to give boxing a try are instead drawn to sports that still have copious free-TV access – football, basketball, baseball and hockey the most prominent among them. Those sports have their own dedicated channels on DirecTV and other satellite services, and 24/7/365 coverage is also provided by ESPN, Fox Sports and other networks frequented by casual sports fans. Boxing has none of those things, and one reason is that there is a lack of cooperation between all the power brokers.

Boxing is infected by a focus on "chasing the next dollar" instead of "let's work together and grow the sport." Premier Boxing Champions tried to resurrect the sport in 2015 by putting shows on NBC and CBS, but because PBC was not able to attract sufficient independent advertisers, those shows ended up being infomercials and the networks eventually said "no more."

As Ron Borges said on a recent podcast that I co-host with James "Smitty" Smith, the main job of a commissioner of a given sport is to grow the sport and leave it better than how he found it when he took office. Boxing has no such person and no such structure – it is the ultimate "Wild West" sport that is run by four different sanctioning bodies with four separate sets of rankings, a circumstance that makes it almost impossible for a fighter to remain undisputed champion should he or she be lucky enough to even *become* an undisputed champion. Turki Alalshikh is attempting to become that power broker, but even if he succeeds in gathering all the networks and promoters into one place, how long will he remain in the sport? If he goes away – and if those huge purses go away – what then?

The best sports are the ones that are easy to understand, and, frankly, boxing is *the* simplest sport in that regard: two athletes inside a boxing ring exchanging punches in order to determine who is the best on that given night. Many of us are drawn to boxing because it is a very relatable sport. When there's a fight on the street, we turn and watch. Every Tom, Dick and Harry who has a personal beef and who wants to make money in settling that beef turns to boxing as its vehicle, because they know that it will draw an audience. Look at what's happening with John Rocker and Patrick Mahomes' father. Look at the growth of bare-knuckle boxing. Look at the expansion of celebrity boxing and YouTuber boxing and other iterations. They all are filling the gap left by "Big-Time Boxing" in the U.S.

While boxing in and of itself is a simple sport that is very marketable, those who are in charge of marketing it to the mainstream have done a horrible job in this country. They have made this simple sport impossibly complicated – and expensive – to follow. We fans who remain must pay for every fight card we see, and that automatically cuts down the potential universe of fans. What if the NFL charged $9.99 for every game and $200 to watch the Super Bowl? What if MLB charged $5.99 per game and required a package deal to watch all the World Series games that year? The same for the NBA and the NBA finals. The audience would shrink precipitously, and rightly so. But they're smart enough to not do this. For boxing, this cutting-down process has lasted generations, and because of that, it was inevitable that this downward spiral would eventually reach its lowest ebb. The withdrawal of ESPN may be that ebb, for as of August, the remaining boxing fans will have to subscribe exclusively to streaming services that not only will charge monthly for basic access, but are charging extra on top of that to see the biggest marquee shows.

The void created by "Big-Time Boxing" has created the vacuum in which Jake Paul has prospered. Say what you will about "The Problem Child," but he knows how to market himself, and he seized upon the environment that was before him. His "event" with Mike Tyson drew the kind of mainstream attention that should be reserved for the best pound-for-pound fighters in the world, but because boxing is the way it is, names like Terence Crawford, Oleksandr Usyk, Artur Beterbiev, Dmitry Bivol and Naoya Inoue might as well be Joe Schmo to the casual fan. That's a shame, because all five surely will be enshrined in the International Boxing Hall of Fame sometime in the next decade or so. As for Paul-Tyson, the audience was so large that Netflix's servers couldn't handle the load caused by so many attempting to see it. Buffering issues ensued, and complaints were lodged. The success of Paul-Tyson in drawing a huge audience proves boxing itself is still a viable attraction. It's too bad that "real" boxing is unwilling to do the work necessary to do the same, especially in the U.S.

So here we are. This is a sport that I've loved for more than half a century. That love has been so strong that it became my identity for those who know me. I want it to thrive. I want it to succeed. I want it to be the great sport that inspired me as a child to learn everything I could about it and its history. It has become my life's work. I am proud of what I've achieved so far.

But in my native land, boxing has become a niche sport. HBO ended its association in 2018. Showtime cut the cord in 2023. And now ESPN, the last link to U.S. linear TV, will fall by the wayside. Yes, I will continue to watch. Yes, I will continue subscribing to the services that show boxing. Yes, I recognize that boxing in other nations is thriving because they do a lot of the right things to promote the sport. I am thankful for that. Boxing as a whole is not dead, but in the U.S. it took a big step toward its possible demise. Although I am an eternal optimist, I am also a realist, and the reality is that boxing's prospects in the U.S. are grim. RING

**Write To The Ring!**
Email comeoutwriting@gmail.com or use this address: P.O. Box 90254, Brooklyn, NY 11209

Al Bello

SOPA Images

**Yuttapong Tongdee (left) halted Thanachai Khamoon in three**

# THAILAND

BY WASIM MATHER

Some exciting news out of Thailand: Yuttapong Tongdee is set to fight for his first world title since turning professional, and just recently I learned that junior bantamweight legend Srisaket Sor Rungvisai will be fighting in Osaka in April. Here we have two boxers from different eras: Yuttapong, the current hope for Thailand's next world champion, and Srisaket, a revered veteran in the latter stages of his illustrious career. These two contrasting fighters, with their distinct styles and career trajectories, underscore both the promise of new talent and the enduring honor of boxing in Thailand. Let's take a look at what these developments mean for the sport and for the legacy of Thai champions.

## Yuttapong Tongdee takes aim at WBO bantamweight title

Tongdee (15-0, 9 KOs), the WBA Asia bantamweight titleholder, is set for the biggest fight of his career as he challenges WBO bantamweight incumbent Yoshiki Takei on May 28 in Yokohama, Japan. It will be his first world title shot and his first time fighting outside of Thailand as a professional – a major step into the global boxing scene.

The fight was initially scheduled for December 24 on the Naoya Inoue vs. Sam Goodman undercard, but a cut Goodman suffered in sparring delayed the event. A rescheduled date was set, but the unbeaten Takei suffered a shoulder injury, forcing another postponement to its current date. Now both fighters are back in camp, preparing for a crucial moment in their careers.

Takei, The Ring's No. 4-rated bantamweight, is a dangerous puncher with an aggressive, high-output style. The former kickboxing champ has stopped eight of his 10 opponents since turning pro in 2021. He won the WBO title by defeating Jason Moloney

(27-3, 19 KOs) before engaging in a thrilling war with Daigo Higa (21-3-1, 19 KOs). While Takei's power is undeniable, Tongdee's team has identified some weaknesses.

"I see his biggest weakness as his confidence and stamina," said Taweesin Laosuwanwat, Yuttapong's manager and promoter. "In his past fights, he didn't look confident at all. If we can push him hard, he'll lose his composure in the ring."

That approach – staying disciplined and forcing Takei to fight at an uncomfortable pace – could be key for Tongdee, who isn't the typical Thai pressure fighter. Instead, he relies on footwork, lateral movement and a sharp jab, setting him apart from many of his countrymen.

Like most Thai fighters, Tongdee started in Muay Thai, where he was known as a "femur" fighter, a term used to describe highly technical boxers in the sport. However, unlike many of his peers, he didn't immediately transition to professional boxing. Instead, he went through Thailand's amateur system, representing his country internationally. His amateur pedigree includes a notable split decision victory over two-time Olympic gold medalist and former WBO featherweight titleholder Robeisy Ramirez.

"Becoming a world champion in Thailand today is extremely difficult," Taweesin admitted. "If Yuttapong can do it, it would mean everything – to him, to me, and to all the Thai fans."

The 31-year-old turned pro in 2020 under TL Promotions, building his record against a mix of journeymen, contenders and debutants – a matchmaking strategy typical in Thailand, though that's a story for another time. His most notable win was a knockout over Filipino prospect Herlan Gomez (5-0, 2 KOs at the time), and his last fight – eight months ago – was a hard-fought 10-round decision victory over a boxer I train, Giuliano Fantone (currently 8-2, 5 KOs).

Of course, there's always the question of inactivity. Eight months is a long time to sit out before facing a world titleholder, but his team is confident.

"Yuttapong has everything he needs to succeed," Taweesin said. "The first step is to beat Takei and become world champion. After that, we're happy to fight any elite fighter in the division. He's [over] 30 now, so we need to fast-track him to the top as soon as possible."

May 28 will be a defining moment for Tongdee, his team and Thai boxing. Facing Takei in his opponent's backyard is a tough task for Yuttapong, and if he wants to win this fight, he needs to avoid engaging in a firefight. Instead, he must rely on his boxing technique and great footwork to outmaneuver Takei.

### Srisaket Sor Rungvisai Returns to Japan for 122-Pound Clash

Former Ring Magazine 115-pound champion Srisaket Sor Rungvisai (58-6-1, 47 KOs) is set to return to action abroad for the first time since his 2022 loss to Jesse "Bam" Rodriguez. Nearly three years have passed since that bout, yet the Thai southpaw has remained active, competing in eight stay-busy fights. Now he steps up in competition as he travels to Japan to face Japanese prospect Kaito Yamasaki (9-1, 5 KOs).

Interestingly, Srisaket made his pro debut in Japan against former three-weight world champion Akira Yaegashi back in 2009, and he last fought in the country against Kenji Oba in 2010. In both of his early Japanese outings, he suffered losses before being picked up by Nakornloung Promotion – a turning point that eventually helped him become a legend in his own right.

The fight, scheduled for eight rounds at the Sumiyoshi Ward Center in Osaka, will mark Rungvisai's first bout at 122 pounds – a move up from the division where he made his name.

At 38 years old, Rungvisai has shown signs of slowing down, and recent performances have been inconsistent. His No. 8 spot in Ring Magazine's junior bantamweight ranking reflects his storied past, but the question remains: How much does he have left?

Yamasaki, 26, is looking to bounce back after a TKO loss to power puncher Subaru Murata (9-0, 9 KOs) in October 2024. While he clearly has potential, stepping into the ring with a battle-tested veteran like Rungvisai presents a major challenge.

For Rungvisai, the Osaka bout serves as a test at a higher weight class against a younger, fresher opponent. Although he's already had his time at the pinnacle of the sport, this fight will determine whether the former champion still has enough left to compete at this demanding level. Meanwhile, for Yamasaki, it represents a crucial opportunity to rebound from his recent setback and make his mark against a seasoned veteran.

In my opinion, while Srisaket's journey is nothing short of inspirational – rising from homelessness and overcoming tremendous adversity to become a true legend – it's apparent that his best days may be behind him. His legacy as a champion is firmly established, but the cumulative wear and tear of years in the ring have taken their toll. It's a familiar narrative in boxing when fighters go past their prime, and it's a bittersweet reminder of the harsh realities of the sport.

★ ★ ★

## AUSTRALIA

BY ANTHONY COCKS

As we come to the end of the first quarter of the new year, the Australian boxing broadcast market continues to change.

**Srisaket Sor Rungvisai (right) throws down against Juan Francisco Estrada in their 2019 rematch.**

Jayne Kamin-Oncea

The highly successful Premier Boxing Series, which debuted last year live and free on domestic streaming service 7plus, is no more.

After 12 well-matched cards supplemented by 24 regular boxing panel shows between the fights, promoter Ace Boxing decided to pull the plug on the deal.

The reason was simple.

The one-year deal (with the option to renew for three more) required Ace to tip in all the money for its shows, including providing its own production (crew and commentators) during the initial 12 months. The hope was that 7plus would extend the arrangement for the additional three years after seeing the quality of their cards and start chipping in for the production cost.

The decision-makers at 7plus – the streaming arm of terrestrial station Channel 7 – said no.

Never mind, though. Ace Boxing will be back on local screens this year, thanks to a new deal they have struck with subscription network Foxtel and its exclusive provider of boxing content, No Limit.

The agreement will see Ace Boxing present three shows on dates that fit in between No Limit promotions this year. The first of these was set for March 1 at South Bank Piazza in South Brisbane, Queensland. As we went to press, Liam Wilson was to rematch Youssef Dib, and practically half of the card was set to spotlight Ace Boxing fighters.

"We signed a three-card deal with No Limit, and we could have had more, but I stepped back from the sport last year," said Ace Boxing architect Angelo Di Carlo, who has promoted shows for over a quarter of a century.

"When this opportunity came around, we took it with open arms. Honestly it's been a real pleasure to work with them. They've helped us in every way possible, and I think it will only improve. I really do.

"I think No Limit has done some great things for the sport, given the very few fighters we've got in this country. I've always said that, even when we've been competitors. I'm proud to have joined them, and I hope it continues for many more years to come."

The other interesting development in the local broadcast space is that DAZN has bought out Rupert Murdoch's Foxtel Group for AU$3.4 billion ($2.13 billion), including their sports streaming service, Kayo.

"This agreement is a victory for News Corp shareholders, DAZN and sports fans in Australia and around the world," said News Corp chief executive Robert Thomson in a media release.

"Foxtel has been transformed into a genuine digital and streaming leader in Australia, and we believe DAZN is the right owner to take the business to the next level with their technological capabilities, global footprint and compelling sports rights."

The deal is still pending regulatory approval but is expected to be finalized before the end of June.

"Foxtel is a successful business that has undergone a remarkable digital transformation in recent years, and we are confident that our global reach and relentless pursuit of innovation will continue to drive the business forward and ensure long-term success," said DAZN CEO Shay Segev.

"We are also committed to using our global reach to export Australia's most popular sports to new markets around the world, and we will continue to promote women's and under-represented sports."

DAZN will likely integrate Kayo into its own platform, a process that would take a full year, at bare minimum.

But boxing fans shouldn't panic just yet. With the sweet science taking up 5% or less of Kayo's sports programming, no imminent changes are expected.

**Australia's Liam Wilson puts the finishing touches on Youssef Dib in their rematch last year.**

Matt King

★ ★ ★

# ARGENTINA

BY DIEGO MORILLA

It wasn't on anyone's must-watch list, but it's now an early candidate on everyone's list of come-from-behind KOs of the year.

Trailing on all three cards, The Ring's No. 8-rated featherweight, Mirco Cuello, managed to land a crippling hook to the body of Christian Olivo, who went down for an eight-count midway through the 10th and final round of their fight on February 1 at Las Vegas' T-Mobile Arena. Seconds later, sensing the opportunity to score a major win on a huge stage (the bout took place on the David Benavidez-David Morrell undercard), Cuello repeated the dosage and Olivo repeated his reaction, going down on one knee. As Olivo was rising to his feet and Cuello readied himself for the final onslaught, referee Chris Flores halted the bout. With the victory, Cuello became the mandatory challenger for Nick Ball's WBA title at 126 pounds.

It was the unbeaten 2020 Olympian's toughest test to date, with Olivo dictating the tempo of the bout and delivering a more polished performance throughout. Olivo also managed to baffle Cuello by switching stances and using fast and accurate combinations from all angles.

Olivo had his best moment of the fight in the second round, when a straight right to the chin sent Cuello to the canvas for a short count.

Cuello tried to find his signature punch to the midsection, with poor results, but the fight found its turning point in the ninth when he stepped up the pressure. Noticing a drop in energy in his foe, Cuello went for the kill but settled for a punishing round that left Olivo ready for the fateful final episode.

At the time of the stoppage, the scorecards were all for Olivo by margins of 88-82 (Max DeLuca), 86-84 (David Sutherland) and 87-83 (Zachary Young).

The 24-year-old Cuello improved to 15-0 (12 KOs) while his 25-year-old foe dropped to 22-2-1 (9 KOs).

"I am happy with this win in a fight that I knew was going to be difficult," said Cuello. "I trained for a month in California. My corner told me that we were behind in the sixth or seventh round, and I had to give everything I had to get the stoppage. Now that I know I am in line for a title shot, I will train harder than ever."

As we went to press, two other fighters were already training harder than ever for their upcoming world title clash: strawweight rising stars Sol Cudos and Sol Baumstarh, rated at Nos. 4 and 5 respectively in The Ring's Women's Ratings. They were set to clash in a winner-take-all bout for neighborhood bragging rights and the almost equally important IBF belt (vacant) in Buenos Aires' legendary Boxing Federation Stadium on February 22.

Cudos (9-0-2, 3 KOs going into the fight) is the up-and-comer who displays tons of energy in the ring, imposing her tempo and her technique in every fight in what has been one of the most explosive careers of the lower weights. Baumstarh (12-6-1, 8 KOs going in) had an unremarkable start to her career, going 2-6-1 in her first nine bouts while losing against some of the best in the biz (Gabriela Alaniz and Carla Merino, among others), before joining forces with former junior welterweight titleholder Juan Coggi and becoming a KO artist of sorts, scoring seven stoppages during a 10-fight unbeaten stretch that led to this title bout.

On that same card, Jose Rosa (27-1, 20 KOs) was scheduled for a return to action after dropping a decision to Khariton Agrba in Russia last November. His opponent was

**Mirco Cuello celebrates after scoring a body-shot knockout of Christian Olivo in Las Vegas.**

Steven Marcus

Colombia's Andres Perez (18-1, 13 KOs). Also, light heavyweight prospect Braian Suarez (19-3, 18 KOs) and proven trialhorse Walter Sequeira (28-12-2, 19 KOs) were slated for a rematch; Suarez won (KO 1 via body shot) in 2020.

In another notable return, former Ring flyweight champion Gabriela "La Chucky" Alaniz will be in action on March 8, looking to reestablish her career in the junior flyweight division after her stoppage loss to undisputed flyweight champion Gabriela Fundora back in November of last year.

★ ★ ★

# SOUTH AFRICA

BY DROEKS MALAN

South African fighters continue to globe-trot, testing up-and-comers on the international scene.

Former cruiserweight contender Thabiso Mchunu journeyed to Moscow, only to drop a wide 10-round decision to 2020 Olympic silver medalist Muslim Gadzhimagomedov. The fight took place in the 224-pound bridgerweight division, unrecognized by The Ring. This was a non-title affair, although Gadzhimagomedov happens to be the WBA's beltholder at the weight.

It may have been wide on the cards, but technically it was far from easy for the Russian, who struggled to cleanly hit the stocky southpaw Mchunu.

The first round was a feeling-out process, with both fighters only landing a straight second hand to the body. Gadzhimagomedov was the one punching but found only air.

In the second, the Russian started letting his combinations go, but Mchunu showed the defensive flair that he is known for, blocking, parrying and slipping underneath the punches. The throwing-and-hoping approach paid off later in the round when Gadzhimagomedov nailed Mchunu on the jaw with a straight right, which sent him staggering back on his heels. Gadzhimagomedov went after his opponent on the ropes, but once again Mchunu negated his attack.

Mchunu landed a left to the body and another to the head in the next round, but those two shots were spread apart with Gadzhimagomedov busier in-between.

The South African started faster in the fourth, but he was only throwing single shots, mostly to the body, while Gadzhimagomedov landed another straight right and the odd jab.

This pattern continued over the next three rounds with some variation. Mchunu tried coming forward, then elected to back up and circle the perimeter, then worked his way inside in a crouching position. The problem was, whatever he did, the offensive output just wasn't there while Gadzhimagomedov kept his hands moving.

Gadzhimagomedov started digging to the body in the seventh, and that paid dividends by the eighth. He nailed Mchunu with a right uppercut that backed him into a corner. He managed to land another left hook, forcing Mchunu to hold.

Gadzhimagomedov let it all hang out in the last two rounds and was firmly in control as Mchunu visibly faded. He was finally landing with more regularity, shortening his punches and getting them in around the gloves of Mchunu. He waved to the crowd in the 10th and landed an eye-catching one-two while Mchunu looked for a big shot that never came.

The scores were 100-90 twice, with a third card of 100-91.

Mchunu has challenged for world titles twice: He was knocked out in nine rounds by Oleksandr Usyk for the WBO belt in 2016, but many considered him unlucky to drop a split decision to Ilunga Makabu in 2022 in a WBC title bout. He has scored some fine victories on the road over the likes of Eddie Chambers, Denis Lebedev and Evgeny Tishchenko during his career.

It was remarkable to watch the short, compact Mchunu outbox much taller and rangier opponents over the years. The defensive moves are still very much there, but the offense has gone missing. In his last fight against Yamil Alberto Peralta (Mchunu lost a split decision), he seemed to struggle to pull the trigger. It is one thing to negate everything your opponent is doing, which he still does very well, but it is another thing to make your opponent pay. That essential bit seems to be a problem for Mchunu lately.

He will no doubt get more of these types of fights on the international scene, but his world title hopes seem to be a thing of the past.

★ ★ ★

# JAPAN

BY YURIKO MIYATA

### Junto's new nickname

At an open workout on February 4 in Los Angeles, Ringmagazine.com writer Manouk Akopyan brought a special gift for three-division titleholder Junto Nakatani.

Nakatani, who signed with Top Rank last July and was three weeks away from the third defense of his WBC bantamweight title against David Cuellar – was delighted when presented with the January 2025 issue of The Ring magazine prior to a one-on-one interview. It was special for him because he appeared in the cover illustration as one of the nominees for Fighter of the Year, along with Oleksandr Usyk, Artur Beterbiev, Daniel Dubois and Jesse "Bam" Rodriguez.

"It's such an honor being on The Ring's cover, and this was my first time [in print]," said Nakatani. "I want to buy multiple copies, but I don't know how."

**Pound-for-pound star Junto Nakatani seeks perfection in the gym before showing his wares under the lights.**

Naoki Fukuda

Akopyan offered Nakatani his own copy, but the humble "cover star" gave it back to him with his autograph, which included his new nickname, "BIG BANG." (He said it was the first "Big Bang" version of his autograph penned in America, adding that Manouk's kind generosity earned it.)

His original nickname, "Ai No Ken Shi" (which roughly translates to "a boxer of love"), was given to him more than 10 years ago by one of his old supporters due to the fighter's lovable personality. Nakatani liked it but was in search of a new ring moniker for the start of 2025.

Last year was a banner year for Nakatani (29-0, 22 KOs), who took home The Ring's 2023 KO of the Year award, entered the magazine's pound-for-pound rankings and stayed active with three knockouts before the close of the year. In Japan, his recognition naturally expanded in 2024. While a guest on a popular TV show late last year, a producer suggested that it might be a good time to adopt a stronger nickname representing who he is.

"Then the term 'Big Bang' came to my mind after thinking about it for a while," Nakatani said. "It describes the origin of the universe, right? Something dense and hot ends up exploding and expanding. That's what I am doing in boxing. I am totally loaded with dense and hot materials from the gym and I'm ready to explode in the fight."

Though he needed just 13 rounds to earn those three KOs last year, his explosive performances were the result of countless rounds of uncompromising preparation. Each camp consists of almost 200 combined rounds of sparring in his hometown of Sagamihara and Los Angeles. And the team makes every round count. Mentor and coach Rudy Hernandez and assistant trainer Daisuke Okabe provide their fighter with creative ways to bother, confuse and overwhelm his opponents.

"I've never gotten bored," said Nakatani. "I have been enjoying learning from Rudy and Daisuke since I was a teenager, back when I sparred even more rounds than I do now. The learning never ends. In every fight, against every opponent, we discuss in the camp what's the main theme of the fight.

"For example, in this coming fight against David Cuellar, the theme is what to do in order to break down and finish a bigger opponent. We prepare for it in the gym, practicing detailed techniques, tricks and moves to make them part of me, and I cannot wait to execute them all in the fight."

That's the formula for the tall (5-foot-8) and rangy boxer-puncher, who is both calm and vicious in the ring.

Nakatani, who has held world titles at 112, 115 and 118 pounds, sees the benefit in gradually moving up in weight.

"The fact is that my fights no longer left my muscles sore after I moved up to bantamweight," he said. "I don't need extra strain to hit hard at this weight. When I was making the lower weights, I had no choice but to cut down muscle mass somewhat during my camps. Now I can make weight without [sacrificing] body mass. I believe that's a big factor in delivering good KOs. Though I know I still have a lot of details to work on to be a better boxer."

Despite his accomplishments and growing fame in Japan, Nakatani behaves like an ordinary boxer. No "star treatment" there or in Los Angeles. He arrives at the gym earlier than his team members. He does not mind getting in line for sparring when the ring is busy. He just calmly waits and watches others work, maybe imagining what he would do if he were in there. And once he enters the ring, he enjoys working on Hernandez's assignments in front of other boxers.

That's his humble secret to success, the spark to his Big Bang. Nobody knows how much further his universe will expand. RING

**Nakatani appeared on the cover of the January 2025 issue.**

(Left) Naoki Fukuda

## BLUNT BLADE:

On August 18, 1990, in the maiden defense of his WBO middleweight title, Nigel Benn scored an eye-popping first-round TKO over American power puncher Iran "The Blade" Barkley in Las Vegas. With the sound of the opening bell still hanging in the air, Benn came out throwing bombs and decked Barkley in the opening 20 seconds. Despite rising on unsteady legs, the challenger managed to stun Benn with a sharp left hook before the pair went for broke in some fierce exchanges. Benn scored two more knockdowns and the bout was stopped on the three-knockdown rule. Referee Carlos Padilla could have penalized Benn twice for striking the ex-champ when he was down but elected to issue verbal warnings only.

# FIGHTLINE

Fights only last a matter of minutes, but fighters are connected to each other by chains that extend for decades – even centuries – into the past. Their bond is a lineage built face-to-face – a young prospect struggles with the skills of an aging veteran whose nose was once broken by a fighter now enshrined in the International Boxing Hall of Fame. In that way, muscle memory carries knowledge and boxers face a piece of everyone their opponent has fought, everyone those people fought, and so on.

This month we're focusing on the 122-pound division, popularized by Puerto Rican great Wilfredo Gomez, who won the WBC belt in 1977 and defended it a division-record 17 times against all comers – winning all by stoppage. Like all of the stars of the 1970s and 1980s, Gomez was a fighting champion, often defending his title four times in a calendar year. We thought it would be fun to link "Bazooka" to Naoya Inoue, the current undisputed champion of the 122-pound division, who plans to defend his belts four times this year.

There are multiple paths linking the power-punching technicians whose primes are separated by almost 50 years, but we've selected the eight-boxer Fightline below. There's at least one way to get there faster. Can you find it?

If so, or if you have another Fightline you'd like to submit, send it to comeoutwriting@gmail.com.

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